

SECRETS OF THE SILENT★



WITCH

II

Matsuri Isora

Illustration by
Nanna Fujimi





A full-body illustration of Louis Miller, a young man with reddish-brown hair in a braid, wearing a dark purple turtleneck, a dark purple coat with a red lining, and black boots. He is holding a long, ornate staff with a golden bell and a red tassel. The background features a large, circular, golden pattern on a light beige background.

The Barrier Mage

LOUIS MILLER

One of the Seven Sages of the Kingdom of Ridill, specializing in barrier magic. No one else can come close to his barriers in terms of size, strength, precision, and duration. Famous and popular for his attractive features and refined manners, he also possesses a more martial side and has single-handedly slain a great number of dragons.

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There was something that nobody present realized—not the hopeless young man, nor any of the soldiers. In the shadow of the young man's fireball, a flaming arrow had appeared.

*...There
it is.*

Monica activated a Farsight spell without chanting. The dragon, the young man, and the young man's fireball—she quietly waited until the moment all three lined up perfectly.

Monica wrapped her hands around her cup, lowered her eyebrows, and gave a crooked smile.

“...I guess I’m the one who’s most out of place.”



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New York

Copyright

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Matsuri Isora

Translation by Alice Prowse

Cover art by Nanna Fujimi

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PROLOGUE

A Little Weekend Challenge

The dormitories at Serendia Academy, an elite institution in the Kingdom of Ridill, were replete with tearooms and lounges where lively voices could always be heard, even on days off from school. That was especially true for the girls' dorm, where noble young ladies shed their school uniforms for the weekend and donned flowery dresses to hold tea parties or enjoy some light conversation in elegance.

One girl, however, was trying to walk as quietly as she could right past one of these tearooms. She was short and had her light-brown hair tied into a single braid; she also wore her school uniform despite it being the weekend.

Serendia Academy allowed students to add things like ribbons and frills to their uniforms and to freely accessorize. This girl's uniform, however, was the same as when she'd received it. She wore no accessories of any kind, either—the only decorative item on her person was the ribbon tying her hair. As she snuck down the hallway, the girl kept her head lowered so as not to meet anyone's eyes.

Before long, however, three girls in gorgeous dresses blocked her way.

"Good day, Lady Monica Norton. How do you do?" one of them asked.

The girl she'd spoken to—Monica—gave a start, then paused in front of them. Keeping her head down, she glanced up through her bangs at the people barring her passage. All three of them were her classmates. The one standing in front was named Caroline Simmons. When Monica had first entered the academy, Caroline had caused her to tumble down the stairs. Monica opened and closed her mouth, trying to squeeze out a polite greeting.

Caroline's slender brow furrowed. "Oh my. Why on earth are you wearing your uniform? It's the weekend, you know."

"I, ummm... Well..."

All the female students living in the dormitory wore their own dresses on the

weekends, which made Monica's school uniform stick out like a sore thumb. She had brought only the bare necessities with her, and aside from her uniform, her only choice would be to wear her usual baggy robe.

As Monica stammered, looking down at the floor, Caroline's two followers began to titter.

"Could she have mistaken today for a school day?" asked one.

"Oh, you mustn't tease her like that," the other remarked. "She probably doesn't *have* any other clothing."

"And to think, they chose *her* as a student council member. It really must be some sort of mistake."

Monica bit her lip and said nothing as the girls giggled from behind their folding fans.

As she hung her head in silence, a piercing voice rang out from behind Caroline and the others. "Oh! And what, pray tell, is going on here?"

A girl with curled orange hair approached them. Her name was Isabelle Norton. She was the daughter of Count Kerbeck—and Monica's collaborator here at the academy.

She seemed to have grasped the situation with a single glance. "I do beg your pardon," she said to Caroline's group, moving between them and Monica. And then, with the face of a terribly wicked, spoiled young girl, she looked at Monica and shouted, "I *told* you to go shopping, didn't I? Why are you still loitering about here?! Slower and dumber than a donkey, as always!"

Monica, frightened, looked at Isabelle, who gave her a furtive wink; her back was turned to the other girls.

"Those things aren't going to buy themselves," continued Isabelle. "And I won't tolerate you missing even a single thing on the list!"

"Y-yes, ma'am!" Monica nodded, mentally thanking the other girl as she fled the scene.

Once she'd gotten outside the dormitory, she breathed a long sigh and brushed the sweat off her forehead. There was plain exhaustion written across

her still-youthful face.

“Yo, Monica. How are you so tired just from leaving the dormitory?” An astonished voice sounded from down at her feet.

Monica turned to see a black cat with glossy fur looking up at her, its golden eyes narrowed.

After making sure nobody was around, Monica squatted and met the cat’s eyes. “Nero,” she said. “I already feel accomplished just having made it outside on a weekend, so... Can I go back now?”

“You’re going shopping! You promised to buy me something tasty at a food stand, remember?” Nero circled around behind Monica’s stooped form and patted her rear with his front paw to hurry her along. “You know the prince is going to be in his dorm all day. It’s the perfect time for a bodyguard like you to relax and do some shopping in town! If you miss this chance, who knows when you’ll get another?”

Monica moaned. “Yes...but...”

She was already out of breath, and all she’d done was leave the dormitory on a weekend. And yet, she was one of the Kingdom of Ridill’s greatest magicians, dispatched on a mission to guard the second prince. She was one of the Seven Sages—the Silent Witch, Monica Everett. The cat patting her on the bottom with his paw was her familiar, Nero.

Monica’s mission was top secret: She needed to guard the second prince without him or any of the other students finding out. To that end, she was now living as a student at Serendia Academy under the name Monica Norton... Unfortunately, she was hopelessly shy.

Her inability to speak in front of others was the very reason she’d mastered the art of unchanted magecraft and why, after becoming a Sage, she had holed up in a mountain cabin and spent all her time on research. She would have had less trouble charging into a horde of dragons than going on a weekend shopping trip.

“I still want to go home...,” she murmured.

Nero looked at her in amazement. “Don’t you normally leave the dorm to

walk to your classroom?”

“W-weekends are different! There are more people in the hallways, and I’m the only one in a uniform, so everyone stares at me when I pass by...”

Nero was about to reply to her string of excuses when he suddenly perked up his ears and dove into a nearby bush. Before Monica could call out his name, someone called hers instead.

“Oh. Is that you, Monica?”

She turned around and saw a girl with flaxen hair—her classmate Lana Colette. Monica was used to seeing her in her school uniform, but now even she was wearing a dress of her own, holding a parasol in her hands. The elegant velvet dress was a deep red, like wine, which suited her fair complexion and slender features.

“It’s rare to see you out and about on a day off. Are you going somewhere, too?”

“Ummm...shopping,” said Monica, fiddling with her fingers. “...I wanted, er, a comb.”

Lana’s eyes glittered. “What a coincidence! I was just about to go shopping for a new accessory myself. Let’s go together,” she suggested, twirling her ribbon-adorned parasol with excitement. “I know a wonderful shop with the cutest combs made of silver and ivory!”

Monica wasn’t sure what to say. Wherever Lana wanted to go, it was probably a first-rate boutique that dealt in fine and precious metals. A plain girl like Monica would definitely be out of place there. Lana would be embarrassed having her around.

“...I’m sorry,” she muttered. “I’m...going by, um, myself.”

This clearly upset Lana. She pursed her lips and turned away slightly. “Oh. Well, fine, then,” she said before briskly passing Monica and boarding a carriage waiting outside the gate.

As Monica idly watched the carriage drive off, Nero poked his face out of the bush. “You sure you don’t want to go with her?” he asked.

“...I wouldn’t fit in at the shops she’s going to.”

Telling herself it was better this way, Monica started walking toward town, her legs sluggish.

* * *

About an hour’s walk from Serendia Academy was a town called Craeme. It was situated on the side of a major road and relatively prosperous, and it had a brick clock tower at its center. This wasn’t a clock tower like you might find as an add-on to a church or a library but a separate building all its own, which was a bit unusual.

“Wow. Look at that clock tower...”

As she gazed up at the structure, Monica would have looked to passersby like a child admiring a grand building. But in reality, equations were racing about in her mind at a dizzying clip.

Architecture and mathematics were inseparable. Even the way bricks were laid one atop the other was governed by precise calculations and incorporated clever designs meant to withstand impacts.

Ah, how beautiful the world of numbers is! thought Monica as she stared up at the splendid tower, retreating into her mind—there were so many people on the streets, Monica was already trying to escape reality. When she slowly lowered her gaze from the clock tower, all she could see were people, people, and more people.

C-could my school uniform be making me stand out? Well, I guess a Serendia Academy student would stand out regardless... Ahhh, I should have brought a coat...!

Legs trembling, Monica moved into the shadow of a building and wiped the sweat off her brow. The short trip here alone seemed to have drained all her stamina for the day.

As she caught her breath, Nero smacked her in the leg with his tail. “Hey, Monica, get with the shopping already.”

“I—I think I’ll, um, go home after all...”

“Don’t even joke! I’ve already decided I’m eating meat today!”

“Yeah, but...,” whined Monica.

Nero snorted, displeased, and turned his back to her. “Then I’ll just have to go make the rounds on my own. See ya.” And with that, he jumped up onto a nearby roof.

Monica frantically tried to follow him, but he was out of sight within seconds. “W-wait...! No, please, don’t leave me... Nero...!”

Half crying, she burst out from the shade of the building, only to freeze under the eyes of the crowd. Even though she knew their gazes weren’t all malicious, Monica started to choke and breathe irregularly. Her breaths came shallow and staccato. She was quickly getting dizzy.

She squatted down to the ground, covered her ears, and closed her eyes. By shutting out all outside sources of information and focusing on numbers, she was able to distract herself, if only a little.

...I can’t keep doing this, she thought to herself. I know I have to stand up and walk on my own two feet. But...

As she tried to force her trembling legs to move so she could stand, someone patted her on the shoulder. She gasped in fright and shut her eyes before gradually prying them open again.

“You all right?”

She looked up and met the gaze of a young man with dirty-blond hair, who was squatting beside her worriedly. He looked to be about her age and was wearing clothing that seemed easy to move around in, a bag over his shoulder.

“Do you feel sick?” he asked.

A soft groan was all Monica could manage. For her, speaking to someone for the first time was pure anguish.

But this person was concerned about her. *I have to say something*, she thought, her trembling lips finally moving.

“Um, I—I got separated from...um, Nero... He’s a cat...”

“What does he look like?”

“...He’s black with, um, golden eyes.”

The young man hummed and nodded, then shot to his feet and gave Monica a toothy grin. “I’ll just have a quick fly around, so you wait right here!” he said before beginning to mutter something under his breath.

When she heard it, Monica’s eyes flew open. It was the chant for a spell.

And not just any spell...! she thought. As the boy’s chant ended, the wind began to whip up around him. With a quick grunt, he kicked off the ground and leaped upward, reaching higher than the rooftops.

This was flight magecraft. Though it allowed one to conveniently fly through the air, it consumed a large amount of mana, and you needed a good sense of balance for it. Monica couldn’t use the spell—mainly for the latter reason. But even among high mages, not many could use flight magecraft; the people on the streets watched with interest as the young man flit across the rooftops.

He shaded his eyes with his hand and took a look around, eventually making a quick landing on a nearby red rooftop. She heard the words “Caught you!” from overhead, along with the angry cry of a cat.

A few minutes later, the young man slowly alighted from the rooftop with Nero cradled in his arms.

“I found him wandering around up there,” he said, pointing to the top of a building not far from where Monica had been squatting. “Is it Nero?”

Nero must have been watching her from above. Uncomfortable in the young man’s arms, the cat turned his cheek and swung his tail.

“...I’m sorry, Nero,” Monica said.

The cat looked at her and meowed, as if to say, *Whatever, it’s fine.*

Just then, they heard a large bell start to ring. Its clangs were wild and urgent—this wasn’t intended to mark the time. This meant there was an emergency.

“Dragon!” someone yelled. “A stray dragon has appeared near town!”

Everyone panicked and began to run. Those with open-air shops rushed to pack away their wares.

Dragons were mostly seen among the mountains to the east of the kingdom, but all too often, one would drift away from their horde and end up here in the flatlands.

The town was surrounded by a stone wall, but a winged dragon could easily fly over it, and frequently, those without wings would simply tear it down to get inside.

Amid the panic, the young man with dirty-blond hair handed Nero off to Monica and began chanting rapidly. "I'm going to see what's happening!" he said. "You evacuate to the center of town!"

With that, he leaped toward the front gates with another flight spell, leaving Monica behind.

Nero whispered from his place in her arms. "Hey, Monica. What are you gonna do?"

A town of this size would have a considerable defense force, but since this was an area with few dragonraids, she doubted they had the necessary equipment to slay dragons. At the same time, it would take too long to call for help from the experts—the Dragon Knights, who were stationed at the royal capital.

...What am I going to do? she repeated to herself. *I guess...there's only one choice.*

A dragon could wave its tail on a whim and cause massive damage. Lana had come here to shop, too, meaning she could get caught up in the attack. And above all, Monica was the second prince's guard. If there was any chance the stray dragon might suddenly head for Serendia Academy, it meant the prince was in danger. She couldn't ignore this.

Everyone was moving as fast as they could toward the center of town or fleeing into buildings. Amid the chaos, Monica slowly raised her head and asked, "Nero, do you know the location and type of the dragon?"

"I don't feel that much mana from it, so it's probably a lesser dragon. Can't give you a precise location, but it's in that direction," he said, twitching his pointed ears toward the front gates.

If it was a lesser dragon, it was probably either a pterodragon, an earth dragon, or a fire dragon. While these were inferior to greater dragons, their hard scales could still deflect both blades and offensive magecraft, making them powerful opponents. To reliably take one out, you had to aim right between their eyes.

“I need to find some place high up, with a good view and not many people...,” said Monica, looking around.

Her eyes stopped on the brick clock tower. Nero jumped from her arms to the ground, and after making sure nobody was nearby, he looked up at Monica and smirked. “You’re gonna do it?”

“...Yes. I have to,” she said, partly to herself. Her face was filled with determination as she ran off toward the clock tower...

“Ah, that was too sudden... My side, it’s...it’s cramping... Ugh...”

“Wow... You *really* need to exercise more,” retorted her familiar.

The top mage in the kingdom clutched her side as she continued to run, wheezing out complaints. Her gait was hopelessly clumsy—more like tottering than running.

Nero sighed, unable to watch. He checked around, and seeing that everyone was gone, he swished his tail. A black fog immediately surrounded him, then rapidly expanded and took on the shape of a person. Eventually, the fog dissipated like water washing away black ink, and from underneath emerged a dark-haired man in an old-fashioned robe. Nero had assumed his human form.

Now a tall man, he grabbed Monica by the nape of her neck and tossed her over his shoulder like a hemp bag full of wheat.

“You’re such a slave driver, Master!” he said. “Hang on tight, you hear?”

“Wh-where am I supposed to hold on to?!”

“Anywhere that works! Just grab hold!” replied Nero, rushing off like the wind.

Nero was quite tall in his human form. Monica, slung over his shoulder, found herself dizzy from the height. It was scary. For now, she tightly gripped the

fabric on the back of Nero's robe and clenched her teeth. If she hadn't, she might have easily bitten her tongue.

Eventually, they arrived at the clock tower, which was—obviously—locked tight. It had no glass panes or gratings, and while there was a window for letting in light, it was pretty high up on the second floor. They wouldn't be able to jump up there.

Monica's expression turned hopeless—she hadn't even considered the possibility that the tower would be locked.

Nero, though, took one look up at the window and grinned. *"True growth comes only after one's limits are broken,"* he quoted. "Dustin Gunther, novelist. Pretty cool, huh? What a great line!"

"N-Nero, you're not about to—?"

"Well, I can't exactly use that magical flying stuff, can I?"

With Monica still over his shoulder, Nero nimbly climbed up a nearby tree, then jumped from a branch to the roof of a house. Monica shrieked every time Nero lurched and swung her around—though her fears hardly ended there.

The distance between the rooftop and the clock-tower window was large enough that it would have challenged even someone with a running start and good physical abilities.

"N-Nero, it's, it's too far—" she stammered.

"Heeere weee gooo...!"

Nero crouched, using his whole body as a spring, leaping off the roof without even a running start. The two of them passed through the small window before landing inside the clock tower. The noise from Nero's boots scraping on the ground echoed through the building.

Straightening up, Nero turned around and said to an exhausted Monica, "Did you see that? I've been cultivating my incredible jumping skills every day as a cat! I've gotta be the coolest ever! It's like I'm the main character of a story now! Yo, Monica, quit it with that blank stare and say something. A compliment, to be specific! Hey! Monica?!"

Monica, who had been half passed out over Nero's shoulder, finally began to regain consciousness and sluggishly moved her head from side to side, surveying their surroundings.

There weren't any sources of light in the clock tower; the only illumination was coming from that window meant to let in the sun. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw a spiral staircase leading to the top of the tower.

"Nero... Go up..."

"Oh, right. Dragons and all that."

It seemed Nero had almost forgotten why they'd come in here in the first place. With a grunt, he adjusted Monica on his shoulder, then used his long legs to dash up the stairs two at a time. Monica's limbs flailed as she desperately tried to stop herself from passing out.

"And we're here!"

At last, they reached the very top of the clock tower, right behind the clock itself. Nero let Monica down. The top floor had many windows for ventilation, which gave a great view of the outside. Monica wobbled over to one and silently cast a farsight spell.

She could see a dragon with brownish scales a fair distance away from the town. It looked about two sizes bigger than a bull.

"...That's an earth dragon."

"Just as I thought. It's a lesser dragon but still pretty sturdy. You'd need to land quite the blow to do any real damage to it."

Earth dragons had no wings and couldn't fly, but the sharp claws protruding from their heavy limbs were threatening enough on their own.

Next to the dragon, a dozen or so soldiers were fighting it with arrows and spears. And there was one more figure, flitting through the air above the earth dragon. With her farsight spell, Monica could clearly make him out—it was the young man with dirty-blond hair who had found Nero for her earlier.

He was using his magecraft to fly around the earth dragon, trying to draw its attacks away from the soldiers on the ground. When he had the chance, he'd

land and use a fireball spell to attack it directly. His fireballs were about the size of a circle formed by two adults joining hands. They created powerful, flashy explosions, but dragons were resistant to mana. His attacks weren't even slowing this one down.

Even against lesser dragons, one had to use high-powered spells and aim directly between their eyes. Otherwise, defeating one was impossible. The only person with offensive magecraft powerful enough to take on a dragon without such precise aim was the Artillery Mage, one of the Seven Sages.

While Monica tried to get a handle on the situation using her farsight, Nero rested his jaw on her head and narrowed his eyes. His sight was good enough that he didn't need to use any spells.

"Hey, Monica," he said. "That guy. Why isn't he attacking from the air?"

As Nero pointed out, the boy would land every time he wanted to use an offensive spell. Then, when he was finished, he'd take to the air again and evade the earth dragon's attacks. It must have struck her familiar as inefficient.

"It's really hard to maintain two spells at the same time," she explained.

"Huh," said Nero, nodding significantly. "You do it all the time, so I figured all mages could."

Rather than respond to Nero's banter, Monica maintained her farsight spell and calculated the distance between the clock tower and the earth dragon. The dragon, the young man, and the young man's fireball—she quietly waited until the moment all three lined up perfectly.

She stood, unblinking, even as a gust of wind blew in from the window and caused her hair to sway. Her usual childlike, nervous expression melted from her face. Her brownish eyes reflected the sunlight, sparkling and turning the color of fresh grass.

The moment came.

...There it is.

* * *

Damn it, damn it, damn it! Nothing I do is working! thought the young man in a panic as he evaded the dragon's attack with his flight spell. His offensive

magecraft hadn't done any damage at all.

A middle-aged soldier with a bow and arrow called up to him, worry evident on his face. "Are you all right?!"

"Everything's fine up here!"

The young man didn't know any of the Craeme soldiers—he wasn't even from Craeme to begin with. He was just an apprentice mage passing through town who had run to the scene of the emergency.

As an apprentice, he could use only two spells: the flight spell and the one to launch fireballs. Not only was he unable to use them simultaneously, but his fireballs also had a short range and low precision. He was confident in their power, at least, so he'd figured getting a hit in would do some damage. Unfortunately, his fire had barely singed the earth dragon's scales. He'd have to aim between the eyes.

I should have spent more time practicing accuracy like my master said! he thought in regret as he ran along the ground, chanting rapidly.

Chanting was such a nuisance. He couldn't use other spells while flying, so when he wanted to attack, he had to run this way and that to evade. Chanting while sprinting at top speed was no easy task.

Completely out of breath, he managed to finish the chant and weave the spell. Then he took aim at the earth dragon's eyes and shot off an extra-large fireball.

It struck the earth dragon in the side of the face, thundering and scattering embers everywhere. But that was it.

It's not working... I can't hit it between the eyes!

But there was something that nobody present realized—not the hopeless young man, nor any of the soldiers. In the shadow of the young man's fireball, a flaming arrow had appeared.

It was slender, like a twig, and it had blended right in with the brilliant flying sparks. But its mana density was high, having been bolstered by a multilayered reinforcement spell, and it packed far more power than the fireball.

The slender arrow pierced the earth dragon between its eyes with terrible silence and precision. The dragon let out a roar, then tumbled to the ground with a loud thump, whipping up dirt and dust.

The soldiers, who had been holding their collective breaths as they watched it collapse, all let out a cheer.

“We did it! We killed it!”

“You really pulled it off!”

The soldiers’ faces broke out into smiles as they clapped the young man on the back and praised him.

The young man looked at the felled dragon in disbelief. There was a black scorch mark between its eyes. It had definitely been killed by fire magecraft.

“Heh, heh-heh... Nah, it was just a lucky hit,” he said humbly, unable to keep the joy from creeping onto his face.

* * *

From her vantage point at the clock-tower window, Monica confirmed that the dragon had stopped moving completely before releasing her farsight spell.

“Is it over?” asked Nero.

“Yeah.”

Striking a dragon between the eyes with an offensive spell wasn’t difficult for Monica. But taking one down without anyone realizing and with several others already engaging it was a lot more difficult.

Monica’s solution had been remote magecraft.

In general, the effects of magecraft were centered on the caster. But by embedding a type of magical formula called a remote formula, the mage could trigger a spell at a distant location. Monica had matched her timing with one of the young man’s attacks, firing a flaming arrow with remote magecraft to pierce the dragon between its eyes.

This kind of spell might seem extraordinarily powerful and convenient at first glance, but it came with an extreme drop in precision. And Monica had used it all without chanting. Anyone who knew anything about magecraft would have

been dumbfounded at the miraculous feat.

The witch who had produced this unseen miracle let her gaze drift up to her familiar, who was still resting his jaw on her head.

“...Nero, you’re heavy.”

“Ha! Not exactly the thanks I was hoping for after carrying you all the way up here,” he responded spitefully, rubbing his jaw on her head. He seemed to think he deserved all the credit. “I worked hard today. Time for that reward, Master. I vote for chicken. Heavily salted.”

“I wonder if anyone’s selling that...” The dragon’s appearance had thrown the town into disarray. She doubted anyone was reckless enough to have kept their stall open.

As Monica mulled this over, Nero directed his gaze to the scenery below them. “Hey, check it out,” he said.

Word of the dragon’s defeat must have spread quickly, because the townspeople were gradually settling down again. Open-air stores and street stalls had reopened, and some people were even hurrying toward the edge of town to try and grab a few of the dragon’s scales.

“Humans are really tough, huh?” remarked Nero.

“Well, I’m not...” Monica sulked.

Nero grabbed Monica’s head and tilted it upward. He grinned, peering at her face from directly above. “Anyway, haven’t you noticed?”

“...? Noticed what?”

“I’m right here next to you, in human form, and you’re totally fine with it.”

Monica’s eyes widened in realization. Though she was extremely shy around everyone, she had an especially hard time with tall men. Until a little while ago, she couldn’t even look directly at Nero in his human form, and even a little touch would start her trembling uncontrollably.

But at some point, she’d become fine with it.

“Looks like you’ve gotten a little tougher yourself, huh?” commented Nero.

“I don’t know...,” she replied without confidence, though the tension in her face lessened just a little.

...I sure hope so, though, she thought to herself.

* * *

“Lady Lana, it seems the dragon has been safely dispatched.”

“...I see.”

Lana gave a curt response to the middle-aged servant woman seated next to her in the carriage. Then, leaning back against a cushion, her face resting in the palm of her hand, she turned to look out the window. The town had fallen deathly quiet just minutes ago, but people were already starting to return. She searched the flow of traffic but didn’t see Monica anywhere.

...I wonder if she’s all right.

They were saying the dragon had been slain before getting close to the main road, so there wasn’t much chance Monica had been caught up in it. Still, she was worried about her. She could easily imagine the slow-witted Monica being swept up into the evacuating crowd, falling down, and starting to cry.

To cover up her anxiety, Lana took on an even stiffer tone as she spoke to her servant. “Ugh. Today is the worst! I was looking forward to shopping, but I can’t find anything good, and then a dragon shows up. And...”

She lowered her gaze to her hands. As she did, the strength in her voice withered. “...It seems like Monica doesn’t want to go shopping with me,” she said, sullen.

The middle-aged servant smiled warmly, as though she was looking at a young child. She’d witnessed the exchange between Lana and her friend from in front of the carriage. This friend didn’t wear a dress even on the weekends, nor any accessories.

She had a feeling she understood what had been bothering the small girl.

“I think maybe your friend didn’t really want a silverwork comb,” the servant suggested.

“.....”

“I, for one, use combs carved from wood.”

Lana gave a start. For a few moments, she sat there awkwardly, seeming conflicted. Soon, though, she sharply lifted her jaw. “I feel like eating some roast chestnuts,” she said haughtily. “Bring me to the food stalls.”

“Yes, yes. Right away, madam.”

The girl had been the servant’s charge for many years now, and she knew her well. She calmly smiled at this selfish request and gave the driver directions.

* * *

With some pocket change from Monica in hand, Nero, still in human form, headed off for the street stalls in a good mood. Monica watched him go, leaning against a roadside tree.

...Come to think of it, I came here to buy a comb, didn’t I...?

Belatedly, she remembered why she had come to town and sighed. She was currently sitting under a tree on a smaller street, away from the main road. It was all she could do right now to sit still there and hide. Apparently, she hadn’t been ready yet for the trial of asking directions and shopping for a comb. With a pained smile, she decided to leave the comb for next time.

Just then, a voice called her name—and it wasn’t Nero’s.

“Monica! I finally found you!”

Monica looked in the direction of the voice and saw Lana climb out of a carriage and rush over to her.

Remembering their conversation this morning, Monica’s face automatically tensed. She’d made Lana unhappy. She must be angry. She certainly *looked* angry—she was staring at Monica, scowling.

Monica fiddled with her fingers and let her gaze drift, and Lana, looking peeved, pushed a small paper bag into Monica’s hands. As she helplessly accepted it, Monica’s eyes widened. She looked inside and saw it was filled with round roasted chestnuts.

“I got tired of eating them, so I don’t need them anymore. You can have them.”

Despite Lana's claim, the package was almost full. And it was still warm, like she'd just bought it.

"Oh, um... Er..." As Monica tried to stammer out a thanks, she noticed a simple map of some sort drawn on the paper wrapping. She figured it marked the location of the roasted-chestnut shop, but upon closer inspection, it had the name of a road and the words *sundries shop* on it. "...A sundries shop?"

"Apparently, such places also stock carved, wooden combs," said Lana, sullenly turning her cheek. Said cheek showed just a hint of red.

Monica clutched the warm packet to her chest and opened her mouth to speak.

"U-um...!" For some reason, the voice that came out was so loud, she could scarcely believe it was hers. Nero's words came to mind: *Looks like you've gotten a little tougher yourself, huh?*

If she really had grown, she should be able to say it. Psyching herself up, she forced out the words. "I, um, want to.....go with you..."

Monica glanced at Lana and saw the corners of her lips twitching for some reason.

"Well, if you insist, I suppose I can go with you! Come on—this way!"

"O-okay!"

Lana smiled haughtily and pulled Monica along by the hand, leading her out from the shade of the tree.

Places with a lot of people still frightened her, but strangely, Monica found herself now able to walk without looking down.

She felt as though a path that had previously been closed off had suddenly opened itself up to her.

* * *

"This one and this one... Oh, and this cape is just so adorable. Let's buy it."

Louis Miller was happily shopping at a clothing store in the royal capital. At twenty-seven years old, he was a happy feller and soon-to-be father, and one of the Seven Sages known as the Barrier Mage.

When on the job, he would wear his Sage's robe and carry a long staff. Today, though, he had cast off his heavy robe and donned an autumn coat instead. Each time he took a lighthearted step through the store, his coat hem and long, trademark braid would bob and sway as if to express his joy.

The items in his hands were all clothing for his child who would soon be born.

Seeing the pile on the counter steadily grow in both size and cost, the beauty in the maid's outfit accompanying him—his contracted spirit, Rynzbelfeid, nicknamed Ryn—spoke up.

"I notice these clothes are all for little girls."

As Ryn had just pointed out, all the clothing Louis had selected was fully decked out with frills and ribbons. She was implying he was getting ahead of himself, since the child's birth was still almost six months away, and they didn't know the baby's gender yet.

Louis, picking out a pair of lacework shoes, gave a prideful sniff. "The child will surely be an adorable girl who takes after Rosalie."

"Do you have a basis for that statement?"

"My gut feeling almost never lets me down."

After stacking up a big pile of clothing for his future daughter on the counter, making no effort to hide his elation, the mage began hunting for clothing a teenage girl might like.

"I think it's far too soon for that, don't you?" said Ryn in a monotone.

"You misunderstand," responded Louis smoothly. "These are for the Silent Witch."

Ryn's eyes opened just a little wider. As a wind spirit, she had different sensitivities from humans, and the expression on her attractive face almost never changed. Apparently, Louis's statement had been surprising even to her. "My...", she said, the single word rich in emotion.

Louis raised his slender eyebrows and stared at his contracted spirit. "Do you *actually* think I'm a cold-blooded, heartless person?"

"I believe that threatening a colleague and forcing her to do a job for you

would generally be considered cold-blooded and heartless.”

“It’s called using the right people for the right tasks.”

The man who had indeed threatened his colleague and forced her to take on a mission to guard the second prince offered his servant a refreshing smile and began to search for a dress suitable for everyday use.

This was to be a reward for the Silent Witch.

It had been approximately two weeks since Monica had entered Serendia Academy. In that short amount of time, she’d been selected for the student council and even managed to capture a criminal using forbidden magecraft at the academy.

Monica wasn’t especially proud of her accomplishments, but she’d done more than enough to deserve praise. Good results warranted suitable rewards.

And for that reason, Louis had chosen to buy her new clothes. Knowing Monica, she probably didn’t have any decent clothing. Guessing that would cause problems for her at the academy, Louis had decided to pick out a few practical outfits. But only because he was already buying clothing for his daughter, of course.

...Although that senseless girl would probably be happier to receive books on mathematics or magecraft, he thought, picking up a dress that seemed appropriate for regular wear.

While undercover at the academy, Monica was playing the part of a foster daughter alienated from House Kerbeck. *Best to stick with something plain,* he thought. He picked out a high-necked navy dress she could wear to go out during the day, as well as an outdoor coat perfect for the season.

After paying for it all, he loaded everything into the carriage, then got in himself.

Louis waited for the carriage to start moving before giving an order to Ryn, who sat next to him. “Deliver these clothes to the Silent Witch as soon as you’re able.”

“What shall I tell her when I do so?” asked Ryn.

He thought for a moment, then said, “I suppose you can tell her it’s a reward for capturing Victor Thornlee. You have to know when to punish and when to praise, after all. Ha-ha-ha.”

“Understood. I will convey your message to the letter. Should we send nothing to the other one?”

“The other one? ...Oh, you mean my apprentice.”

When Louis had sent Monica to Serendia Academy, he’d dispatched his own apprentice along with her. The second prince Felix Arc Ridill’s senses were sharp, and he was excellent at rooting out those around him with ulterior motives, whether their aim was to guard or to kill him. It was only natural he’d be suspicious of a new student. So Louis had sent his own apprentice to the school as a decoy, in order to divert Felix’s suspicions away from Monica.

Ryn was asking whether they should deliver anything to this apprentice, but Louis shook his head. “No need to go that far. That idiot doesn’t know anything, after all.”

“Have you not mentioned the decoy plan? Or the mission to guard the prince?”

“He’s a terrible liar, and anyway, even without my instruction, he’ll be an excellent decoy. He’s a total problem child, after all—huge build, huge voice... and responsible for destroying a school building at Minerva’s once. Ha-ha-ha.”

The smile that came to Louis’s beautiful, feminine face was refreshing, but his words were villainous.

“I believe that using an ignorant apprentice as a decoy would generally be considered cold-blooded and heartless,” said Ryn.

Louis shrugged. Her words had no effect on him. “It’s a master’s job to spur their apprentice’s growth. And growth always wants for suitable trials.”

* * *

News that a dragon had appeared near the town of Craeme quickly made its way to Serendia Academy. Though it rattled the students’ relaxing day off, once they’d learned the dragon had been slain, they went about their weekend like nothing had happened.

A single person watched all this, biting their lip.

...So, they thought, this is the reaction of central nobles who barely feel the cost of dragonraids.

The heartland of the Kingdom of Ridill, centered around the royal capital, was home to the Dragon Knights—a group of expert dragon slayers—and the Magic Corps, who valued skill over politics. Thus, those of this region felt little threat from dragons.

For people from the east, who had to constantly worry about dragonraids, the sight of the center nobles living in peace and security inspired no small amount of envy.

The news said that a passing mage had easily slain the dragon in Craeme. They wondered what would have happened if the incident had taken place back in their hometown. How much would they and their fellows have needed to sacrifice to slay a single earth dragon? How much human blood would have been shed?

Mages were a rare sight in the countryside—and there weren't many skilled enough to fell dragons in the first place. But here, in the center territories, skilled mages were lazing about all over.

Though the eastern regions were bearing the terrible brunt of the dragonraids, the kingdom's military force was concentrated at the center, defending the nobles there. That was the current state of the Kingdom of Ridill, under Duke Clockford's pervasive influence.

That's why I have to change things, they told themselves, quickly returning to their own room. There, they opened a locked drawer and pulled an object out from the back.

To some, it may have looked like a broach, with its goldwork and shining red jewel. But a closer inspection would reveal three sturdy rivets behind the decorative frame. This item was meant to be stuck into a wall or floor and fixed there.

...It's only a matter of time before the heir is decided... Using this is my last option.

They could use it only once, so they'd have to be very careful.

Now that so many outside contractors are coming in and out in preparation for the school festival, it's the perfect opportunity... If I time it right, according to what supplies are coming in...

They gazed down at the object resting on their palm, their face hardening into grim resolve.

Behind the veil of a relaxing day off, evil had quietly begun to act.

The Silent Witch.

She is the genius mage who can derive the best solution to
a difficult magical formula in an instant—
and therefore doesn't need to chant.

SECRETS OF THE
SILENT★
WITCH
II



CHAPTER 1

The Silent Witch, or the Misspeaking Witch

Lindsey Pail, a teacher at Serendia Academy, sat in her seat in the faculty room and heaved a melancholic sigh.

Lindsey would be twenty-six this year, and she was a plain woman, about whom nothing particularly stood out. She wore her gray-flecked blond hair tied back without much thought to style.

Nevertheless, she was the teacher for ballroom dancing, and she did at least try to maintain an elegant posture at all times. Now, however, she was hunched over, drained.

About two weeks prior, Victor Thornlee—professor of fundamental magecraft—had been arrested. Apparently, he had been embezzling school funds to secretly research forbidden spells.

The incident had brought inspectors from the royal capital and the Mages Guild to Serendia Academy for several days in a row. The academy was under the direct control of Duke Clockford, an influential noble, and he seemed to have arranged things so that only a minimal investigation would be carried out—but things had still been very busy. Every time inspectors came around, Lindsey, a younger faculty member, would have to prepare all the relevant documents for submission.

...And now I'm even in charge of a classroom... She sighed to herself.

Lindsey hadn't been at the academy all that long, and she'd only ever worked as an assistant homeroom teacher. Now, after Thornlee's arrest, she was suddenly in charge of his class. To be honest, the pressure was giving her a stomachache.

As Lindsey continued to sigh, her shoulders drooping, the headmaster entered the faculty room from the hallway. Next to him was an old man holding a staff. The man was short, with thick white eyebrows and facial hair burying his eyes and mouth. His staff was decorative, and of a length only high mages were

permitted to use.

All eyes turned toward the middle-aged headmaster, who plastered a wide smile on his face and began to speak.

“May I have everyone’s attention, please? This is William Macragan, our new teacher for fundamental magecraft!”

Macragan gave a single nod. From under his white mustache, he began to mumble. “Pleased to meet you. I look forward to working with you all.”

“Mr. Macragan is a high mage known as the Waterbite Mage—and formerly a professor emeritus from Minerva’s, the highest institution for aspiring mages in the kingdom! He was even responsible for teaching both the Barrier Mage and the Silent Witch before they joined the ranks of the Seven Sages!”

The headmaster waved his arms in all directions as he sung the man’s praises. Macragan’s next words, however, seemed somehow absent-minded.

“Being a professor emeritus is no fun. What I really love is teaching... I hope to meet plenty of lively students here.”

* * *

On the first day after the weekend, Monica’s steps were just a little bit lighter as she headed to the student council room after class. After all, she had done a better job than ever at braiding her hair this time. It must have been thanks to the comb she’d picked out with Lana and bought the day before.

She let out a breathy chuckle as she recalled the flavor of the roasted chestnuts she’d eaten in the carriage with Lana. She was still laughing as she opened the door to the student council room.

Inside, a short young man with brown hair was organizing some documents. This was Neil Clay Maywood, the general affairs officer and a second-year in the advanced course like Monica.

When he noticed her, he looked up from his papers. “Hello, Lady Norton.”

“H-hello. Um, I’ll help!”

Neil smiled and thanked her. He had a very nice smile. He was the only other second-year on the student council and had a friendly personality. As such, he

was someone Monica, who had extreme social anxiety, found relatively easy to talk to... Actually, it was more that the other council members were just particularly eccentric.

The other members included Bridget Greyham, one of the secretaries, who had opposed Monica becoming the student accountant. Since Monica had been appointed, Bridget had barely said two words to her.

Elliott Howard, the other secretary, took on a seemingly friendly attitude, but his stare was always cold when he looked at Monica, and everything he said to her was barbed with thorns. He clearly didn't think a commoner like Monica should even be at this academy.

Cyril Ashley, the vice president, never made mention of Monica's origins. He was also polite when teaching her the job. If she was being honest, he was the next easiest to talk to after Neil. Unfortunately, Cyril was rather devoted to the president and came down hard on her if he detected any rudeness.

To top it all off, said president was the kingdom's second prince, Felix Arc Ridill. He was the one who had appointed Monica as accountant—and the one she'd been tasked to protect. He seemed to enjoy teasing her.

Monica's daily life now basically consisted of Felix teasing her, her panicking, Cyril scolding her for improper behavior, and Elliott and Bridget glaring at her coldly.

But today, I'll take the teasing with confidence! ...Well, that's impossible, but if I can just not act suspiciously... Yeah...

Setting the bar low for herself, Monica glanced over the papers in front of her. The documents contained lists from contractors being used for the school festival. Each list had the company's seal next to their name.

Naturally, the contractors moving in and out of Serendia Academy had been carefully selected from first-rate businesses. The school also checked all incoming carriages for the appropriate seal to prevent anyone suspicious from entering the campus. Monica's heart fluttered as she stared at the seals on the documents—she enjoyed looking at precise diagrams and designs.

Next to her, Neil—who was organizing the documents—said in a relaxed tone,

“Come to think of it, tomorrow is the day we observe elective classes. Have you already decided which ones you’ll choose?”

“Huh?! Oh, um, no... Not yet.”

Serendia Academy had an elective system alongside its normal classes. Students chose whichever two classes they liked from a pool of more than twenty. Because of how much variety there was, Monica hadn’t been able to make a decision yet. She would have liked to take advanced math courses, but Serendia Academy didn’t put much emphasis on mathematics and only offered basic courses.

“Um... What sort of classes are, um, popular?” asked Monica, hoping for some ideas.

Neil put his finger to his chin and thought for a moment, his round eyes rolling up and to the side. “For boys, horseback riding and swordsmanship are pretty popular,” he said. “For girls, embroidery and poetry, I think... Music is popular with both—it’s a sign of refinement, after all.”

Neil’s suggestions were all things Monica had never had anything to do with. She could manage to sew a few stitches, but she wasn’t that particular about her clothing, so whenever something ripped, she’d just sew it back together quickly, and that was enough for her. She’d never even considered trying embroidery.

Now I’m really not sure, thought Monica, at her wit’s end. Just then, she heard the door open and turned to see the rest of the council members filing in.

“Hey, there. What are the two of you chatting about?”

It was the president, Felix, who’d cheerfully addressed Neil and Monica.

Monica unconsciously looked down and began to fidget, so Neil answered for her. “We were talking about elective choices. Tomorrow’s the observation tour.”

“I see. Has Lady Norton decided what she’s taking?”

“Hwah?!” exclaimed Monica, unprepared for the sudden question. As expected, Cyril glared at her. She withered under his gaze, her own eyes drifting

from side to side as she muttered, “U-um, I still, um, haven’t...decided.”

Someone snorted derisively—it was Elliott. He narrowed his drooping eyes and gave a dramatic shrug. “For nobles, knowing an art is a sign of refinement. At the very least, you *must* be able to play a musical instrument. Lady Norton, do you have any such experience?”

“...N-no,” said Monica, hanging her head.

Elliott’s grin deepened. He purposefully shifted his gaze to Bridget. “Speaking of musical instruments, Lady Bridget is quite skilled at piano, isn’t she?”

Bridget came from an excellent family, she was beautiful, *and* she had amazing grades. She was the perfect noble lady, completely above criticism.

By comparing her to Bridget, Elliot was mocking Monica’s lack of accomplishment. “Hey, Lady Bridget. Will you be taking a music class?”

“No. This year I’ll be taking linguistics and geography,” answered Bridget flatly, starting work on a pile of documents.

Elliott’s eyebrows rose slightly—he seemed surprised. “Huh. You’re so talented, it kind of seems like a waste... Oh, but there *is* someone here with no understanding of art...isn’t there, Cyril?” he said, grinning at the vice president.

Cyril was clearly enraged as he glared at Elliott. “I’ll be taking advanced practical magecraft this year, obviously. Magecraft is just as refined a skill for nobles as any of those other things.”

They glared at each other, one with no knowledge of art and the other with no knowledge of magecraft. The air in the room grew heavy.

The situation seemed ready to explode any moment, and Monica and Neil, both timid by nature, went pale. Finally Felix, sitting at his desk with his chin in his hand, mumbled to himself, “But Cyril’s so good at singing, he should take choir.”

Cyril’s eyes popped wide open at the prince’s remark. The color began to drain from his face. “Sir, when...when did you—?”

“You sing when you’re by yourself in the reference room sometimes, don’t you? I’ve always been struck by how good you are.”

At that, Cyril ceased to look pale and instead went red up to his ears. He bowed deeply to Felix. "...I am so, so terribly sorry for sullyng your ears."

Cyril seemed sincerely ashamed, but Felix moved his chin to rest on his folded hands and smiled mischievously. "Won't you let me hear it properly sometime?"

"No, of course not! My singing is nowhere near skilled enough to perform for someone like you!" Cyril shook his head vehemently. "I'm going to work on these documents now," he said, fleeing into the reference room.

Chuckling, Felix looked at Elliott. "And, Elliot, you're pretty talented with the violin yourself, aren't you? I'd love to hear you and Cyril perform together."

"...Please, give me a break." Elliott, too, seemed to have had the edge taken off his malice. He moved to his seat and started working.

That seemed to be the end of the conversation. *Can I get back to work now...?* wondered Monica, turning back to the desk—only for Felix to address her this time.

"Lady Norton, if you haven't decided on what classes to take, why not try something related to magecraft?"

"Hwah?!" exclaimed Monica. It wasn't hot, but her whole body had broken out in a sweat. "Um, b-but why would...you suggest that...?"

"Magecraft and mathematics have a lot in common. And you're good at math, right?"

Felix was right. Magecraft and math had a lot in common. That was why Monica—who was talented at math—had learned to cast spells without chanting and why she'd become one of the Seven Sages.

If she had been a normal mage, she could have taken a magecraft course while keeping her identity a secret. However, Monica had one fatal flaw: She couldn't chant in front of others. She couldn't cast spells normally—unchanted magecraft was *all* she could do. And as soon as she used it, her identity would be revealed. Monica was the only one in the world with such a talent.

The Silent Witch, one of the top mages in the kingdom, continued to sweat as

she racked her brain. *What’s the right thing to say at times like this? I absolutely cannot take a magecraft course! But if I reject it too firmly, he’ll just get suspicious...*

At that moment, she recalled the words of her silver-tongued colleague, the Barrier Mage Louis Miller.

“You don’t need to say yes to every troubling suggestion. You can say something like, *That’s a good idea; I’ll let you know*, and just never give a definite reply.”

That’s it! thought Monica, clenching a fist. She could just say she’d consider the magecraft class and leave it at that.

“Actually, Lady Norton,” continued Felix, “I’ll be one of the guides for the observation tour tomorrow. I could show you around if you’d like.”

“Yes! That’s a good idea. I’ll let you know!”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she got the feeling she’d committed a grave error.

Felix smiled. “Oh. You think it’s a good idea, then? I’m happy to hear it.”

“Yes, sir!Huh?”

Felix’s smile was so beautiful, it would steal the hearts of most noble young women. But now that she’d realized her misstep, Monica was no longer paying attention to any of that.

Her mission was to guard Felix. But Louis hadn’t told her to stick by his side at all hours of the day. Just getting into the student council with him was a miraculous feat. If she was in unnecessary contact with him elsewhere, that would only increase the danger of her identity coming to light.

Monica frantically waved her hands. “Um, I, that’s not... I didn’t mean it about that, um, I meant it about...the classes...”

“I’ll pick you up from your classroom tomorrow, then,” continued Felix.

Faced with his gorgeous smile, she became unable to respond. Her head was blank—save for the voice of her mean-spirited colleague laughing wickedly at her.

Oh, what's this, my fellow Sage? From today forward, should you not change your title from the Silent Witch to the Misspeaking Witch?

She had no response for the voice in her head, either. The Misspeaking Witch was at her wit's end.



CHAPTER 2

The Terrifying Mana Capacity Gauge

Elective classes at Serendia Academy generally included a mix of students from all three grades. However, the third-year students decided on their electives at the very start of the semester, so they'd already had about half a month more time in class than first-and second-year students. The observation tour was intended to give those younger students a chance to move around and observe the third-years' classes.

In all honesty, Monica had wanted to go around with Lana, but she'd apparently already decided on a class.

"Hey, Monica, what classes are you taking?" Lana asked.

"U-um...I was going to decide after looking around a bit...," she answered with a vague smile.

As soon as class let out, Monica burst from the room. Felix had said he'd pick her up at her classroom today, but if that happened, she'd once again stand out in a bad way.

After leaving the classroom and walking for a bit, she caught sight of Felix just as he rounded the corner of the hallway. He greeted her with a simple "hey" and a smile, his gorgeous golden locks swaying. "I said I'd come get you. You're pretty enthusiastic about this, huh?"

She couldn't tell him she'd run out of the classroom to avoid negative attention. Her eyes darted around, unable to look at him. "Um, well, yes, I, er... I'm really enthusiastic, and...well, thank you for showing me around." Monica bowed her head and started walking, staying a few steps behind Felix.

Most of those in the hallway were first-and second-year students, but here and there, a third-year like Felix could be seen. A handful of them seemed to be serving as guides.

I just have to take a look at the minecraft class... As long as I decide on something else by the end, there won't be any problem. Yeah..., she thought to

herself.

Then suddenly, it dawned on her. Which classes had Felix taken? If he'd recommended magecraft to Monica, did that mean he was studying it as well? She'd heard that many of the members of Ridill's royal family were especially good at magecraft. The current king was proficient in earth magecraft, though he seldom displayed his talents.

"U-um...," she stammered. "A-are you, um, taking the magecraft class, too?"

"No, I don't have any such talent," he said casually with a shake of his head. He didn't seem particularly frustrated about it.

That surprised Monica a little. The world at large considered Felix Arc Ridill to be a perfect prince, capable of anything. And he *was* very talented. His skills included not only swordplay and horsemanship but book learning, too. And his training in dance and the other refined arts was perfect. She'd heard he already had a record of achievement in diplomacy. This was completely different from Monica, who was bad at almost everything.

...But he can't use magecraft. Huh.

Innate talent, such as how much mana a person was born with, played a big role in magecraft, so it wasn't something he could do much about. Still, since he'd mentioned how it had a lot in common with mathematics, she'd assumed he was pretty well versed in the subject.

While she was letting her thoughts wander, she heard a person cry out from ahead of them. Her gaze naturally drifted to the source—a young man with dirty-blond hair running toward them.

"Oh," said Monica softly, coming to a stop. Felix followed suit, looking at her as though asking if this was someone she knew.

As she struggled to answer, the loud young man stopped in front of Monica. "It *is* you! I knew it! Hi!" he said cheerfully, a toothy grin on his face.

This was the young mage she'd run into in Craeme two days ago. *He's a student here...?! she thought.*

He'd been wearing simple clothes when she'd met him in Craeme, and he

spoke with the accent of a commoner. She hadn't even considered the possibility he might be attending Serendia Academy.

Meanwhile, another member of the student council—Neil—came rushing down the hall from the same direction. “Glenn, no running in the halls!” Then he paused, his eyes widening in surprise. “...Huh? The president and Lady Norton? Do you know Glenn?”

Monica wasn't sure how to answer. But when she hesitated, the boy named Glenn happily took over. “I ran into this tiny girl two days ago in the town of Craeme,” he told Neil.

Slightly crushed by the words *tiny girl*, Monica looked up at the young man. He was tall—probably about as tall as Felix. But if he was in the same class as Neil, he must have been a second-year student just like her.

“I'm Glenn Dudley! I just transferred in this autumn. Neil's my classmate.”

He came to school this autumn? That meant he'd transferred here at the same time as Monica. A little surprised to learn about another transfer student, she introduced herself.

“Um, I'm...M-Monica Norton...”

“Pleased to meet you!” said Glenn, shaking Monica's hand up and down before turning to Felix beside her. “And pleased to meet you as well! Are you a third-year?”

Monica's and Neil's eyes both went wide. *How could someone at this school not know what Felix looks like?!* thought Monica, paling... She chose to ignore her own past experience for the moment.

Felix didn't seem particularly offended, though. He gave Glenn one of his usual calm smiles. “Pleased to meet you, Dudley... I've heard a lot about you. I'm Felix Arc Ridill, student council president.”



SERENDIA ACADEMY SECOND-YEAR

Glenn Dudley

“The student council president?! Wait, wait, are you the prince, then?! That’s crazy!”

“Glenn! Glenn, that’s rude!”

Neil, white in the face, tugged on Glenn’s arm, but Felix smiled gently and said, “Don’t worry about it.” It was very generous—which was to be expected, considering he tolerated Monica’s lack of courtesy every single day.

Felix smiled amicably at Glenn, then said, “Oh, yes,” as though he’d just recalled something. “Craeme, you say? An earth dragon appeared there two days ago. I heard a passing mage worked with the town guard to defeat it... The two of you weren’t caught up in that, were you?”

Monica was not the only one startled by the question. Glenn clearly averted his gaze, then declared in an unnaturally loud voice, “Oh, nah, I was far away from all that!”

...*Huh?* thought Monica, confused by his attitude. Monica had used her own magecraft alongside Glenn’s that day to slay the earth dragon—she intended for everyone to think Glenn had been the one to defeat it. She’d figured he would go around bragging to everyone in sight.

But he seemed to be trying his best to keep it a secret. Clearly, there was something going on Monica wasn’t aware of. She stared up at him.

Glenn must have noticed her, because he returned her gaze. “Oh, right! Monica, what electives are you taking?”

“Um... I, er... Well...”

“I’m going to bring Lady Norton to the fundamental magecraft class,” answered Felix in her place.

Glenn’s expression immediately brightened. “Hey, Neil and I are headed there, too!”

“What a coincidence. Shall we go together?”

“Sure thing!” said Glenn, energetically taking Felix up on his invitation. It may have been ill-mannered of him, but he had such an affable aura that it was hard to hold it against him.

Monica secretly sighed in relief now that she knew they'd be going with Glenn and Neil. She wasn't great with big groups, but it was a whole lot easier than walking around with someone as conspicuous as Felix on her own.

When she casually moved behind the group, Glenn followed suit, putting some distance between them and the others before beckoning to her. He seemed to want to talk about something privately.

When Monica looked up at him, Glenn bent over and whispered in her ear. "Hey. Got a favor to ask of you, Monica."

"Y-yes...?" she replied, straightening up.

Face serious, Glenn continued, "I want you to keep it a secret that I used magecraft in town."

The magecraft he'd used in town—did he mean the flight spell? Being able to use magecraft at all imparted a certain kind of status, and it was considered an extremely intellectual hobby among nobles. Monica was undercover and concealing her identity, so it made sense to keep her talent a secret, but she couldn't think of any reason Glenn would want to hide his. It was so strange.

He awkwardly scratched his dirty-blond hair. "I'm actually still just an apprentice. My master told me not to use magecraft without supervision."

"Huh? Y-you're an apprentice...?"

If Glenn was an apprentice, then he wouldn't even have a beginner's mage certification. But she'd never heard of an apprentice who could use flight magecraft.

At Monica's surprised expression, Glenn's face turned grim. "If my master finds out I used magecraft without permission...he's gonna wrap me up in a mat and hang me from the rafters. Or maybe even throw me in a river..."

"H-he sure sounds scary."

"Oh, he's *terrifying*! So I want you to keep it a secret from everyone else! I'm begging you!" pleaded Glenn, as though this was his last resort.

The plea made Monica feel a sense of kinship with him. She, too, had to hide her magecraft because of her position. She knew her circumstances were

different from his, but feeling a sense of closeness anyway, she nodded and said, “I will.”

“You two seem close,” came Felix’s voice from ahead of them.

Monica and Glenn both cringed at the same time. As Monica panicked and struggled to think of an excuse, Glenn made his voice even louder and said, “Yeah! When we met in town, we were totally on the same page! Oh, speaking of”—he turned to Monica—“if you’re taking fundamental magecraft, does that mean you’re interested in it, too?”

“N-n-n-n-n-no, I, um, I...!” she stammered. Felix had coerced her into going to observe the class, but she couldn’t afford to take any magecraft-related electives. “I-just thought I’d, um, go see, that’s all...”

All I have to do is sit in today, then pick something else when the time comes, she told herself.

Felix stopped in front of a classroom—evidently this was where they taught fundamental magecraft.

“Personally, I would highly recommend this class,” explained the prince. “The new teacher is very famous.”

“Th-they are...?”

Monica had a bad feeling about that. *I-it’s fine; I’m fine. Nobody at this academy knows who I am. Mr. Louis said he checked beforehand..... Wait, but Felix just said they only arrived recently...*

Felix opened the classroom door. At the podium stood a short old man wearing a robe and holding a staff. His eyes and mouth were buried under his sheet-white eyebrows, mustache, and beard. When he looked over, he let out a grunt of surprise.

The moment Monica saw him, she felt the blood drain from her body.

...M-Mr. Macragan—?!

William Macragan, the Waterbite Mage, had once been Monica’s practical magecraft teacher back when she’d attended Minerva’s Mage Training Institution. Monica heard he’d become a professor emeritus around the time

she graduated. *But now he's here, teaching at Serendia Academy!*

The words *mission failed* whirled around in her mind. *It...it's over... Everything's over... Execution... Execution...*, she thought, standing there like she was already a corpse.

Macragan looked over at them and, after a few moments, asked, “.....Who's that?”

Felix, in the front, spoke for the group. “I am Felix Arc Ridill, student council president.”

“Ah yes, the student council president... Mm... Thank you for guiding them... Two observers? Three? I'm sorry, but my eyes aren't that good.”

“Three observers. I'm serving as their guide.”

“Three? I see, I see. Feel free to take a seat anywhere you like.”

His absentminded tone and peculiar way of speaking were just as Monica remembered—his poor vision, too. Now that she thought of it, his eyes had always been bad, ever since she'd known him at Minerva's.

Could it be that...h-he didn't notice? Okay. I can still get out of this. Besides, she wasn't in the academy's register as Monica Everett but as Monica Norton. As long as nobody yelled out her first name, he wouldn't realize it was her...

“Hey, Neil! Monica! Over here! There are empty seats over here!”

Ahhhhhh! Monica screamed to herself as Glenn called her over, his voice booming. Her eyes darted to Macragan.

Macragan didn't appear to be thinking about Monica, though. It seemed he still hadn't noticed. Trying to soothe her pounding heartbeat, she took a seat next to Glenn. Even Felix, who wasn't here to observe, plopped himself down in the seat next to her, a look of amusement on his face. She hoped he'd get back to his job of showing students around as soon as possible.

With Monica cowering in her seat, Macragan began his lecture.

“Uhhh, ahem. How to begin? Ah yes. A mage's aptitude, I suppose. Mages all need to be excellent in three areas: mana capacity, magical formula comprehension, and mana control.”

Macragan wrote all three terms on the blackboard, then circled *mana capacity* first.

“And the most important is this—one’s mana capacity. Without a decent amount of mana, you can’t use magecraft at all. These days, with the right equipment, we can easily measure a person’s capacity. For apprentices, we would be looking for around fifty, at least. Over a hundred, and you’re fairly talented. With over one hundred and fifty, you could even become one of the Seven Sages.”

Monica’s shoulders jolted at the mention of the Seven Sages. *This is so bad for my heart!*

“Next is magical formula comprehension... Magical formulae have much in common with mathematics, so many who are skilled at math are also skilled at grasping magical formulae. After all, they are essentially the blueprints and frameworks of magecraft. The more precisely you understand them, the more precise the spells themselves will be.”

Macragan paused there, his eyes growing distant, as though reminiscing about something. “Yes, yes. I once had a student who possessed an outstandingly high level of such comprehension. She understood everything very quickly and eventually learned how to cast spells without even chanting... She’s one of the Seven Sages now. The Silent Witch, they call her.”

Eeeeeep!

“Oh, and incidentally, the Silent Witch along with some of the magical formulae she created will appear on written exams, so be sure to remember them.”

Please don’t!

“Ah yes. It would not be an overstatement to say that she upended the whole of modern magecraft theory—a truly incredible mage.”

That’s definitely an overstatement! she mentally screamed, her face having moved past “pale” and onto “ghostlike.” If she could, she would have fled this very instant.

Next to her, Glenn quietly asked if she was okay. Monica faked a smile and

noded a little—it was all she could manage.

“The last of the three is mana control. This refers to the skill with which one weaves their mana based on magical formulae. It’s something you have a sense for. Those who have the sense can weave their mana without difficulty, but those who don’t will let their mana slip away without ever casting anything. Those who can still use some magecraft despite low comprehension of the formulae are mostly people with excellent mana control. To draw an analogy with architecture, these are the type of people who can put something together even if their blueprints and framework are shoddy. Their spells usually lack polish, however.”

Glenn is probably one of those types, thought Monica to herself. The magecraft she’d seen him use in Craeme had been rough—she could hardly call his magical formulae *polished*. But because his mana control was excellent, he was still able to master the advanced art of flight magecraft.

“Still, if you want to be a first-rate mage, you would ideally have all three. Well. The most important condition is mana—if you don’t have any, you can’t use magecraft. I’ll be measuring everyone’s mana capacity who wishes to take this class,” said Macragan, setting a crystal ball on the podium.

The crystal was affixed to a metal pedestal, and the pedestal featured a scale that went from 0 to 250.

“This crystal ball is called a mana capacity gauge. When you lay your hand on it, it measures your mana capacity. Just like this, see?”

Macragan set his hand on the crystal ball. It shone with a blue light, and the scale moved to 160. A mana capacity of 160... That was well within the range of a high mage.

“My mana capacity is 160, and the light is blue, which means the element I have the highest affinity with is water... This gauge provides an easy way to understand your magic power. Amazing, right? Now all of you can have a turn.”

.....*What?*

Monica’s heart pounded in her ears.

When measuring mana capacity, those who scored from 1 to 49 were

talentless. 50 through 99 put you at an apprentice or lower mage level. 100 through 129 meant you were an intermediate-level mage. 130 and above meant you were a high mage. Almost nobody got over 200.

One of the requirements to join the Seven Sages was a mana capacity of at least 150, and you had to be checked once a year. Because of that, Monica knew exactly what her capacity was.

Wh-when I last measured it, it was...202...

Mana capacity peaked during a person's late teenage years, so it was possible hers was even higher than that now. Regardless, having a mana capacity of more than 200 meant she was no normal person.

Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what do I do?!

Monica broke out in a cold sweat and felt her body start to tremble.

Throughout every age, there existed one all-powerful phrase a person could use to get out of any situation: *I have to go to the bathroom.*

But such omnipotent words were not spoken so easily by everyone. For those with extreme social anxiety, simply saying anything in front of others was a considerable obstacle.

Thus, Monica stayed petrified in her seat, almost managing to say the words before closing her mouth, opening it, then closing it again.

This time I'll say it. Next time I'll say it. When there's a good lull in the conversation, I'll say it. What constitutes a good lull? Whatever. I'll just say it. This time, this time for sure... As her mind raced, the mana capacity gauge inched closer and closer. Neil had his hand on the crystal now.

If Monica touched it, everything would be over. They'd know she wasn't a normal person.

"Officer Maywood," commented Felix, "it looks like your most compatible element is earth, with a mana capacity of 96. That's a pretty good number. You've never studied magecraft before, have you?"

Felix sounded impressed; Neil gave a sweet smile and said, "I've only studied it a little in the classroom. My father is apparently quite talented, though."

“Ah yes. House Maywood is famed for its generations of powerful earth mages, after all.”

Now. I have to say “I’m going to the bathroom” right now... Ah, but then they’ll think I’m interrupting what Felix is saying, won’t they? Monica hesitated.

“Me next!” said Glenn enthusiastically, reaching for the gauge.

Ahhhh! After Glenn, I’ll be next... I have to get out of here before that happens... She was sweating buckets. Just then, she heard a *krrrrk* from right next to her.

...“Krrrrk”?

The sound had come from the mana capacity gauge under Glenn’s hand. The portion of the crystal ball he was touching was glowing red, and there was a small crack in it.

“Ah!” Glen cried, just as a much larger crack appeared in the ball. Flustered, he removed his hand.

“Mr. Macragan! This thing’s broken!”

“You’re kidding. How much do you think those cost, young man?”

“Gyah! I-i-i-it wasn’t my fault! It must be defective! Yeah, that’s it!”

Since the crystal had glowed red, that meant Glenn’s most compatible element was fire. The issue was his mana capacity. The gauge had swung all the way to the end. The device’s maximum value was 250, so that kind of reaction must mean he had at least that much...but was such a thing even possible?

One could count the number of people in the kingdom whose mana capacity exceeded 250 on a single hand. Only two of the Seven Sages had that much.

If Glenn’s mana capacity really is over 250, that would be amazing, but... Everyone here seemed to think it was because the gauge had broken. Monica was inclined to agree.

In a panic, Glenn lifted up the gauge and shouted, “This isn’t going to explode, right? We’ll be fine, won’t we?”

The other students all started speaking and looking at Glenn. This was

Monica's chance to escape. She tugged on the hem of Glenn's uniform and said, "Um, I... I'm going to go to the bathroom!"

"Gotcha!" Glenn nodded, not doubting her in the slightest.

Relieved, Monica snuck out of the classroom.

* * *

W-wow, that was close... Monica heaved a very long sigh as she leaned against the wall of the hallway.

But she couldn't let down her guard. There was still far too much time remaining in the elective observation period. If she didn't go back to the fundamental magecraft class, Glenn and Felix might get suspicious.

As she trudged down the hallway, she wondered what excuse she could give. *At this point, maybe I should just tell them I had a stomachache and was stuck in the bathroom for the whole period...* It was a sloppy excuse. Just then, she saw another elective classroom in front of her.

The door had been left open so students could go freely in and out. Curious what class it was, Monica peeked around from behind the door to check.

Is that...chess?

In the classroom, students were silently playing chess. Monica had never played it and didn't know the rules, but she did know it was a popular tabletop game among nobles.

I didn't know chess was a class at this school..., she thought, taking out a list from her pocket to check. And there it was, under "electives." There were quite a few students inside, so she assumed it was a popular class.

I wonder if there are any rules to how you move the pieces. As she absently stared at the nearest table from behind the door, someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"Well, look who we have here. It's the prince's favorite little squirrel, skittering around the halls."

A young man with drooping eyes and dark-brown hair was looking down at her—it was Elliott Howard.

His eyes narrowed into a mean grin, just as they had when he had mocked her for her lack of cultural refinement earlier.

“Does the little squirrel have an interest in chess? Well, in that case, I’ll show you the ropes.”

“N-no, I... Um—”

Before Monica could turn around and escape, Elliot had grabbed her wrist and dragged her into the classroom. Several of the people playing chess in the room stopped and looked toward Monica. She immediately looked down out of awkwardness.

“Hey, just take a seat right here. How many years have you been playing? ...Or do you not even know the names of the pieces?”

“N-no, I don’t know them,” she said, nodding in complete earnestness at Elliott’s mocking words.

He laughed hard enough that his shoulders shook, then he took the seat across from her. “Then let’s start with their names and how to move the pieces. These are pawns. The weakest pieces,” he said, picking up a black piece and a white piece and explaining how they moved.

Monica had scant knowledge of tabletop games like these. It wasn’t that she lacked interest—she’d just never had much chance to play any before. When it came to chess, the most she’d ever done was watch from afar as noble kids played it during her time at Minerva’s.

Once Elliott had finished explaining all the pieces, Monica very hesitantly raised a hand and asked, “...Um, so, this game... What do you have to do to win?”

“Pfft-ha-ha! You really know nothing about this, do you? It’s very simple. You capture the enemy’s king. That’s all,” said Elliott, plucking up the white king and grinning. “Chess is a game of mock war. For nobles like the rest of us, it’s an important hobby for instilling a strategic mindset.”

“...Mock war,” she repeated, looking down at the pieces on the board. “What pieces would magic soldiers be?”

“Probably the bishops. Warrior monks used to be partial to using magecraft.”

“Then the mages—er, warrior monks. Do they have set values for their magecraft power? Like, what magecraft they’re most compatible with, their attack ranges... Oh, and what’s the estimated strength of their defensive barriers? What about the weapons the foot soldiers carry? How much food has been stored in the fortresses?”

“What?” said Elliott, blinking in confusion.

Monica continued prattling on. “Does this mock war have a specific season or climate? Geographical height differences? Which way is the wind blowing?”

Her questions were completely serious, and all Elliott could do for a few moments was let his jaw hang open. Eventually, though, he burst out laughing. “Hold your horses there! The board can’t exactly fit all of that! This is just a game, little squirrel. You talk as though you’ve experienced a real war!”

“...I’ve never, um, been in a war.”

Monica had never participated in a war pitting humans against each other—but she *had* participated in live combat practice with the Magic Corps alongside the Barrier Mage Louis Miller. Her colleague had made absolutely sure she knew *exactly* how to read a strategic map before they were through. To fire spells precise enough to shoot down pterodragons in one hit, you needed to know the lay of the land and the direction of the wind.

“...Then the setting of this mock war is a simple flat plain?” asked Monica to make sure. “There are no altitude differences, and the pieces will only move in predetermined ways. There are no negotiations with high-ranking officers—you just kill the king.”

“Y-yeah,” said Elliott, nodding. He looked a little creeped out.

Monica continued to gaze at the board, then declared:

“In that case, it seems easy.”

At Monica’s remark, Elliott narrowed his droopy eyes dangerously, and the corners of his lips pulled up. *Ah, what a foolish, shameless little girl*, he thought. Without bothering to hide his anger and contempt, he laughed at her. “Do you

understand, Lady Norton, that you've just made an enemy out of every person in this room?"

Monica didn't respond. She just continued to gaze at the board in silence.

"Wait, wait. You're not about to move a pawn one square and tell me how easy it was, are you?"

Monica remained silent. However, Elliott recognized the impassive face she was directing at the game board. It was exactly the same as the one she'd worn when she'd been ordered to review the accounting records.

Monica Norton was a trivial little girl without a noble upbringing. And yet she'd found the perpetrator who had dropped the flowerpot trying to kill Felix, and she'd perfectly reviewed all the accounting records.

Elliott thought for a few moments, then rearranged the pieces on the board Monica was still staring at—to place the white ones in front of her. Her face slowly rose from the board to look at him.

He purposefully assumed an intrepid grin. "Want to try playing a game to see how it goes? I'll even remove my own queen."

"...Who goes first?"

"White goes first. Whenever you're ready," he said, taking the black queen off the board.

Monica's eyes widened as she turned her stare on Elliott. "You're letting me go first?"

"Sure. Go right ahead." He nodded, face full of confidence, yet feeling a strange sense of unease. Despite being an absolute beginner, Monica had realized that the one to move first in this game had the advantage.

"...All right, then," said Monica, immediately moving a pawn from the middle of the board forward two spaces.

At first, pawns appeared to have simple rules for how they moved, but they were surprisingly complicated. Usually, they could move only one space forward at a time. But when a pawn was still in its starting position, it was allowed to move two spaces forward instead. It had a different way of moving

when taking enemy pieces as well—in those cases, it moved diagonally. And if it got all the way to the end of the board, it could become any other piece.

...I doubt she could have understood it all just with one explanation, thought Elliott. Advancing a middle pawn on the first move was a fairly common play. You had to move the front pieces up early in order to give your rear pieces room to move.

...A well-thought-out play for an amateur, I suppose, he thought, looking coldly down at the board and moving his own piece. The way Monica held the pieces certainly made it clear that she was a beginner. She didn't really know how to pick them up or place them back down.

And yet, as they continued, she never hesitated when making a move. After Elliott advanced one of his knights, Monica responded immediately.

They were playing this game casually, for enjoyment. They hadn't decided any time limits for their turns and weren't keeping track of it.

She could play as slowly as she wanted, giving it a lot of thought. Elliott moved another piece, and Monica, without wasting a moment, made her next move. She was playing so fast, he started to wonder if she wasn't thinking at all.

...Is she trying to pressure me? ...No...

Elliott looked down at the board and frowned. The logic Monica was using to move her pieces seemed like it was straight out of a chess textbook. If it had been anyone else, Elliott wouldn't have been so surprised. But Monica had just learned the rules a few minutes ago.

...And yet, she's already grasped this much strategy?



After thinking for a few moments, Elliott made his next move. Monica once again returned fire immediately.

Unable to resist, Elliott said, “We’re not playing with any time limits here. Why not think your moves through?”

“.....” Monica didn’t respond—she just stared at the pieces on the board.

Elliott scowled slightly and took his turn. Then Monica took hers right away.

At some point, people began to gather around their table. But Elliott wasn’t paying any attention to their new audience. His gaze was nailed to the board, and his lips, hidden behind one hand, were drawn back in astonishment.

...What is this?

Elliott was one of the three most skilled players in this classroom. He’d given himself a handicap by removing his queen, but he wasn’t pulling any punches. He figured he’d aggressively drive Monica into a corner even with the handicap, then torment her before eventually checkmating her.

And yet, now it seemed *he* was the one being cornered. It was plain for anyone to see.

Monica wasn’t making any of the surprise moves or odd plays common to beginners. She was playing beautifully, in a model fashion—extremely precise and without any waste. Not only was she predicting all of Elliott’s moves, she was beating them, steadily whittling down his numbers. His downfall was only a matter of time.

...Wait a minute, thought Elliott. As he gazed at the board, he noticed a single way to turn the tide. He still had a king and a rook that hadn’t moved—and nothing between the two of them.

...I can castle here.

Under specific conditions, you were allowed to move both the king and the rook in a single turn. It was a play called *castling*. He still hadn’t taught Monica what castling was. He’d figured he could easily crush her without needing to use it.

...If I use it now, I can win.

But Monica wasn't aware of the move.

Should I use it anyway?

His pride made him hesitate.

Would he go on to lose, or would he win by castling, a trick he hadn't taught her?

The moment his hand stopped, a stir moved through the crowd. They were probably wondering why he wasn't castling.

Oh, right. They have no idea I didn't teach it to her.

Once he realized that, his hand moved unconsciously. He took up both his king and one of his rooks...and castled his king.

Monica, who had until now been looking only at the board, blinked and looked up at Elliott.

Stop. Don't look at me.

He averted his eyes, trying to escape her gaze.

Meanwhile, his lips were already composing an eloquent excuse.

"That was called *castling*. You can only do it if you have a king and rook that haven't moved yet, there aren't any other pieces in the way, and your king isn't in check—"

"I've lost."

But before he could finish his explanation, she announced her defeat.

"*Castle-ing?*" she said, trying out the word. "If that's an official rule, then I can no longer win."

Elliott was astonished.

Why hadn't that made the little squirrel angry? He'd just beaten her using a rule he'd never told her about. She had the right to be angry—it wasn't fair.

Nevertheless, he couldn't make out the slightest bit of anger on her face as her eyebrows drooped and she began to fiddle with her fingers.

"...I-I'm sorry for calling it easy... Chess is harder than I thought... No matter

how optimal your moves, your opponent is human, so...there are a lot of uncertainties involved.”

The winner of this game was Elliott.

But he was left with only the bitter taste of defeat—and self-loathing.

If Monica had criticized him, he might’ve felt a little better about it. He would have been fine with her laying the blame on him, saying it wasn’t fair to use a move he hadn’t taught her. But she didn’t seem to consider it much of a problem—she just lined her pieces back up, her thoughts focused on castling.

Elliott started to say something to her.

He didn’t know if he was about to apologize or ask why she wasn’t angry with him—he just knew he had to say something.

But before he could make a sound, someone else spoke up.

It was a tall man with a shaved head and stern face. He could have been mistaken for a veteran mercenary, but he was—perhaps unbelievably—the chess teacher, Mr. Boyd.

“You, the female student. Your name?”

Monica’s gaze drifted left and right, but there weren’t very many female students in the classroom. And Boyd was looking directly at her.

Under his piercing gaze, she started to shake like a little squirrel that had encountered a much larger animal.

“M-Mo...Moni, Moni, Moni...”

Shaking all over, she tried her best to say her name...but she just kept repeating “Moni” and not getting to the rest of it.

Boyd, who was looking down at her, had more than just stern facial features. His whole body was strongly built with rippling muscles. He looked like someone who should be standing on a battlefield with the enemy general’s head in his hand, not playing with little chess pieces. It was only natural she was terrified.

Elliott sighed in resignation and interrupted her. “Lady Monica Norton. She’s

on the student council with me, Mr. Boyd.”

“Understood,” he replied in a deep, echoing voice that seemed to come from the base of his stomach. He placed a piece of paper into Monica’s hand—an elective application form.

Monica, still squeaking out a series of *Monis*, looked tearfully between the teacher and the application.

Boyd continued, voice firm and clear, “Make sure you join.”

She nodded stiffly, still choking out, “Moni, Moni.”

...I bet she doesn’t even know what he’s saying to her, thought Elliott, sighing to himself and narrowing his eyes in exasperation.



CHAPTER 3

The Bull with No Tail, the Cheerful Noble Girl, and the Cat Who Wore a Skirt

Once the observation tour was over, Monica headed to the student council room. She was dragging her feet—after all, she’d slipped out in the middle of fundamental magecraft and hadn’t returned before the tour was over. Felix might say something to her.

...But that chess class was fun.

Chess was entertaining to her in a different way than equations and magical formulae were. As she thought through all the different moves she could have made—if she’d used the knight then, instead of the pawn, or if her opponent had attacked like so—she opened the door to the student council room.

Only Cyril and Elliott were inside. They were both looking seriously at a piece of paper, lost in conversation. Wondering if some sort of trouble had cropped up, Monica listened in on what they were saying.

“...Cyril, I’m going to ask again. What is this?”

“All I can see is a bull and a wheel.”

“All I can see is a rabbit and a rotten orange slice!”

Based on what little she could hear, she had no idea what they were talking about. But before she could figure out what to say, Elliott noticed her and looked up from the sheet of paper—before making a bitter face and averting his eyes.

D-did I say something rude during chess today...and make him angry...?! she thought, flustered.

Cyril noticed Monica as well and called out to her. “Oh. Accountant Norton.”

Accountant Norton—when he said her title, she felt her back straighten slightly. No longer hunched and standing a little taller, she looked up at Cyril. “H-hello... Um, what were you, uh, talking about?” she asked.

Cyril lowered his gaze to the piece of paper. “Preparations for the school festival will be in full swing starting next month, and we’ll have a lot more contractors coming in and out. We were verifying the contractors’ seals in advance.”

Monica remembered seeing contractors’ seals on the documents she and Neil had been organizing the day before. She thought back on the emblems inscribed next to the company names.

Elliott continued Cyril’s explanation. “I’m in charge of handling the Abbott Company, which Cyril was in charge of last year. When I asked him what their seal looked like, he told me it was a bull and a wheel. But both of those are incredibly common, right? I know of at least three or four companies with a bull-and-wheel motif.”

“That’s why I drew it out for you,” said Cyril, a sour expression on his face as he thrust the paper in his hand at Elliott.

When Monica caught a glimpse of it, she found herself at a loss for words. If she had to express what she saw verbally, she might say...it was a distorted circular object split into twelve sections behind a four-legged, wriggly something-or-other.

Elliott looked exasperated as he pointed to the wriggly something-or-other’s head. “Right here, poking up vertically—those are rabbit ears, aren’t they?”

“They’re *bull horns*,” stated Cyril, his tone matter-of-fact.

Elliott turned a pitying gaze on the other boy.

Monica didn’t want to be rude to Cyril, but she agreed with Elliott. The short legs on the round silhouette definitely seemed more rabbitlike than bull-like. She was staring into the wriggly thing’s big, round eyes when Elliott turned the conversation to her. “Hey, Lady Norton. Does this look like a bull to you?”

“Huh?! Uh, ummmmmmm...” She stole a glance at Cyril, who was staring at her with his usual piercing gaze. But in those sharp, penetrating eyes, she got the feeling—though perhaps it was just her imagination—that she saw a glitter of something like...anticipation...

When Monica started fiddling with her fingers and letting her gaze drift,

Elliott shrugged. “See, Cyril? Face reality.”

“Well, this is all the prince himself needed to figure it out!”

“Yeah, probably because he knows you were handling Abbott last year,” said Elliott, exasperated.

Cyril flew into a rage. “You doubt His Royal Highness’s words?!”

“What I *doubt* is your artistic sense! How did you think this would get your point across?! Ugh. This is what happens when someone has no refinement!”

As the two started to argue in earnest, Monica rallied her courage and stammered, “Um, umm, umm...!”

They both turned toward her—which alone nearly caused her legs to buckle. Nevertheless, she snatched up a feather pen and focused, scrawling something on a nearby piece of paper. After about a minute, Monica had finished.

“Th-this is the, um, emblem for the Abbott Company...”

A bull facing left against a wheel with twelve spokes. She’d drawn it from memory. Cyril’s and Elliott’s eyes were glued to the paper.

“It’s exactly how I remember it.”

“Lady Norton, would you happen to be related to the Abbott Company in some way?”

Monica shook her head, then returned the feather pen to its stand. “I saw it on the list yesterday. Um, I...I’m good at remembering diagrams and drawing them from memory, so...”

Certain imbuelement spells, which imbued matter with mana, wove a magical formula into a special pattern or design. Monica loved those patterns—they were beautifully calculated—and whenever she’d had a free moment at Minerva’s, she used to copy them down on paper until her hands were black with ink.

“How do you draw such perfect circles and straight lines without using any tools...?” wondered Elliott aloud.

Cyril looked between his own picture and Monica’s, then pounded a fist into

his palm as though he'd just realized something. "I see. My bull was missing a tail."

"What it was *missing* was any kind of artistic ability. How can someone so embarrassed about their singing being heard shamelessly show other people something like *this*?"

Just as hostility began to creep back into the room, the door swung open. It was the beautiful student council secretary, Bridget Greyham.

She took one look at the two boys, still glaring at each other, and declared flatly, "Security contacted us saying an Abbott Company cart is at the front gate. Whoever is handling them, please go check them in."

That was the very company with the bull-and-wheel emblem they'd just been talking about. Elliott, the one responsible, frowned suspiciously. "A shipment of supplies?" he asked. "This is considerably earlier than expected. They deal in fireworks and explosives, which would grow damp if they brought them too soon... All right. I'll head over now."

As Elliott moved to exit the room, Cyril called out for him to wait. "The rules say that when outside contractors are doing work on academy grounds, they must be greeted by one faculty member or two student council officers. I'll come with you."

"You have a meeting with the club presidents after this, don't you?" said Elliott. "And Lady Bridget is busy writing invitations for the festival." He looked over at Monica, the only one here without urgent business. "Lady Norton, you're with me."

"M-me?"

"You've never supervised outside contractors before, have you? This is a good chance to learn the process."

Elliott's suggestion made sense. But when Monica thought about her and Elliott working together—considering his constant open hostility toward her—her legs started to wobble. Plus, she'd just upset him during chess class.

Maybe he's bringing me along to scold me...

But she couldn't run away from him forever. Things were only going to get busier from now on as they prepared for the school festival. She took a short, deep breath, then turned to look at Elliott.

"I—I understand. I'll, um, come along with you."

"Great. Thanks, Lady Norton."

As Elliott looked down at her, his expression wasn't simple distaste but a complicated mix of emotions.

Cyril's eyes unconsciously followed Elliott and Monica as they left the student council room.

...Will they be all right? he wondered.

Elliott hated people he considered "upstarts" and could be extremely aggressive toward them. Cyril himself was no exception, having originally been a commoner before his adoption by Marquess Highown. Elliott still sent prickly remarks his way, but his hostility had been much more blatant back when Cyril first enrolled at the academy.

"Don't get cocky, commoner," he'd said. "I hate people like you—people who don't know their place—to death."

Cyril preferred to judge people on their merits, but Elliott held social class above all else. Obviously, someone so fixated on class wouldn't think highly of Monica, who had clearly been raised a commoner.

As Cyril nervously glanced toward the hallway, Bridget, who was still writing invitations, stopped her work and remarked coldly, "You're so overprotective."

He glared at her, his lips bent into a frown. "Should Accountant Norton embarrass us in front of outsiders, it could affect Serendia Academy's reputation. It's only natural I'd be concerned."

"Let's leave it at that, then, shall we?" answered the beautiful girl—one of the three most beautiful in the academy—without so much as a smile.

Then, she looked at the paper still in Cyril's hand. On it was his drawing of the Abbott Company's emblem—the one Elliott had castigated. Bridget eyed it with suspicion. "By the way," she said, "what is that child's doodle? Some sort of

code?”

“.....Forget about it.”

* * *

Elliott looked away from Monica and fixed his gaze ahead, a sour expression on his face. He was walking with long strides. She kept glancing at him, obviously frightened. She probably thought he was going to say something unkind.

Ah, for the love of..., he thought to himself. *I managed to bring her out, but what am I supposed to say?*

Earlier, in chess class, he had played against Monica and won—but only by using castling, a move he hadn’t taught her. This country girl who didn’t even know the game had overwhelmed him, and he’d gotten worked up over it.

What he’d done wasn’t fair. It was shameful behavior for a noble, one who was supposed to lead others. Still, the thought of simply apologizing annoyed him. Irritated and unable to think of anything to say, he opened his mouth and closed it, then opened it and closed it again.

In the meantime, the two of them exited the school building and came within sight of the cart. It was stopped in front of the west storehouse, where it would unload. That meant its documents must have already been checked at the front gate.

Elliott had the key to the storehouse, so all that was left was to check the materials and unload them.

Once they started working, Elliott would lose his chance to talk to Monica. Realizing this, he made up his mind.

“Oh, Lady Norton, about the chess match earlier...,” he said, glancing at her.

Monica had stopped in her tracks and seemed to be staring at something. All expression had vanished from her face.

“...It’s different,” she said.

“What?”

Monica pointed to the emblem on the side of the cart and said quietly, “That

seal isn't the same as I remember."

Elliott frowned and observed the cart's emblem. A large wheel and a bull. It looked exactly the same as the picture Monica had drawn earlier. "What's different?"

"The wheel should have twelve spokes. But the wheel in the cart's emblem only has ten."

"Are you sure you're not misremembering?" he asked dubiously.

Then Monica—her tone unusually firm—said with certainty, "Yes, I'm sure. Once I see a design, I never forget it."

Whether it was reviewing accounting books or playing chess...when she became absorbed in something, Monica Norton took on an almost scarily impassive expression. It was as if she had cut away everything aside from her object of interest. The rest of the world was invisible to her. Now she wasn't even sparing him a glance—she was simply staring at the emblem.

Elliott gulped, then took a closer look at the Abbott Company cart.

It was your usual covered wagon, drawn by two horses. One person sat behind the horses and another stood beside them. Both were middle-aged men, dressed like typical merchants ready to do business with a high-end customer. Elliott couldn't see anything suspicious about them.

Monica must be mistaken, he thought. Still... This delivery is more than a week ahead of schedule.

As he was trying to decide what call to make, Monica whispered to him, "There's one more thing."

"Is there?"

"The bull—it looks very similar, but...they forgot to draw the tail."

With that, Elliott made his decision. "Yes, that *is* strange. A first-rate contractor selling to Serendia Academy would never make as silly a mistake as Cyril."

If those men were lying about who they were, they might be here to steal something or kidnap someone... Either way, they were up to no good.

The man in front of the cart noticed Elliott and came over to him. The driver, however, kept his hands on the reins. Any merchant with manners would tie up the horses somewhere, get down, and greet his business client.

...And he isn't doing that—probably so he can make a break for it if he needs to.

Keeping his eyes on the men, he whispered to Monica, “Lady Norton, I’ll stall for time by talking to them. You go call security.”

At his suggestion, expression flooded back into Monica’s face. Uncertain, she looked up at Elliott, frowning. “Um, but then you’ll be in danger...sir.”

Elliott snorted in amusement. He wasn’t particularly talented at swordsmanship or hand-to-hand combat, and he couldn’t use magecraft. Nonetheless, he should be the one to stay, not Monica.

After all...

“I’m a noble, remember? We have a duty to protect the common folk. Unlike you, I have obligations.”

Elliott Howard was a man who held fast to notions of social status. He believed everyone should carry out the roles assigned to them at birth—nobles should act like nobles, commoners like commoners.

A noble must serve as a model to the people and contribute to society. They must provide assistance to the powerless citizens and protect them.

For that reason, he had to remain here while Monica fled—to fulfill his duty and protect his pride as a noble.

The man pretending to be with the Abbott Company was now close enough to hear them—and the false smile vanished from his face. He’d probably noticed the change in Elliott’s and Monica’s expressions.

“Go now, Lady Norton!”

He pushed her to the side just as the man rushed at him. A knife gleamed silver in the man’s hand.

The area around the storehouse was deserted. If Elliott was attacked here, he didn’t stand a chance.

So, this is it... he thought, clicking his tongue.

But just then, he heard the horses neigh.

* * *

The moment one of the men pulled a knife, they became nothing but enemies in Monica's mind. Whatever the intruders' aim, as long as it was possible they might assassinate the second prince, his bodyguard couldn't afford to overlook it.

The issue was how to neutralize them. With Elliott next to her, her options were limited. If she used a low-power shock spell to disable them, they'd suddenly pass out, which would be too unnatural.

Staggering from Elliott's shove, her eyes fell on the horses attached to the cart.

...Sorry, she apologized in her heart. Without chanting, she delivered an extremely weak electric shock to the two horses' rear ends.

Surprised by the pain, the horses became agitated, standing up on their hind legs and neighing.

"Wh-what on—?!" exclaimed the driver, frantically grasping at the reins—an action that just excited the horses even more.

Suddenly, they shot off at a breakneck speed. The driver lost his balance and fell from his seat with a shriek. Then Monica used a shock spell on the man who had fallen and knocked him out. That would make it seem like the fall had been what rendered him unconscious.

...One down.

The out-of-control cart hurtled toward the man with the knife. He screamed, dropped his weapon, and rolled onto the ground to avoid the cart.

As he rolled, Monica used her shock spell again to render him unconscious—so that it looked like he was hit by the cart and knocked out.

It was an extremely inconspicuous, yet terrifyingly advanced, way to fight. She was timing her magecraft to hit exactly when her targets were hidden behind the horses' bodies, out of Elliott's line of sight. All this was made possible only

by her quick-to-activate unchanted spells.

Now she just had to calm the horses down—

“Lady Norton, get back!”

“Pyaaaah?!” yelped Monica, jumping backward at Elliott’s warning. The horses’ legs just barely grazed her. A moment later, the cart’s wheels clattered right past her nose.

“Eee, eep...,” she shrieked, falling to the ground. Froth filled the horses’ mouths—they’d completely lost it. She must have given them too intense a shock.

Elliott clicked his tongue bitterly. “Damn. I guess that saved us, but... Why did those horses suddenly go crazy?!”

It’s my fault! I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorryyyyyyy!

Just as the pair felt out of danger, the horses followed the fence into a turn, swinging around back the way they’d come.

“Up the tree! Come on!” Elliot shouted.

“O-okaaaaay!”

Elliott began skillfully climbing a nearby tree...but Monica, who had zero motor skills, got just one step up before sliding back down the trunk. As she kept trying, the clattering of the cart grew closer.

“Lady Norton, hurry up! Grab on!” shouted Elliott desperately, reaching his hand down from the tree.

Monica frantically reached up—but by removing her hand from the tree in her already unsteady position, she lost her balance and toppled backward.

“Oof!”

When she hit the ground, she saw it—the out-of-control cart, right before her eyes.

If I use a defensive barrier, it’ll be too obvious... Should I create a gust of wind? No, I would need more than a little wind to stop the horses... The shock spell again? It would be unnatural if I made it strong enough to knock them out, and

a weaker jolt would probably just make things worse... Ahhhh. Her eyes were spinning, and she was unable to collect her thoughts.

Just then, she felt someone tug at her arm.

“This way!”

A girl’s white-gloved hand had grabbed her own. With a strength unusual for a maiden of Serendia Academy, the girl pulled Monica in.

Monica’s small body was wrapped up in the arms of her savior. “Eep...”

“Phew. That was a close call.”

The one who had reeled her in and held her was a tall female student. Her light-brown hair was tied in the back, and she seemed full of energy. Judging by the ribbon at her collar, she was a second-year student like Monica. But her face wasn’t familiar, so she must have been from another class.

“Th-thank, thank, thank—”

“You can thank me later! Step away for a minute!” said the tall girl, rolling up her skirt hem and confronting the runaway cart that was once again heading right for them.

“W-watch out! It’s dangerous!” cried Monica.

“What are you doing?!” Elliott shouted to the girl. “Get out of there!”

Despite their warnings, the girl stared straight at the cart without moving.

As it charged her, she dodged it by a hairbreadth, grabbed the flailing reins, and jumped. Her white skirt fluttered out, then came to a stop in the driver’s seat.

“You’re fine now,” she said soothingly, pulling on the left and right reins in turn. “See? Calm down. Come on, come on.”

She never once scolded the horses or yanked on the reins. As she firmly repeated, “Come on, come on,” they gradually slowed and calmed down.

“Good boys,” said the girl, pulling on the reins again to bring the horses to a halt.

Elliott climbed down from the tree and looked at her, eyes wide. “That was

amazing...”

Not everyone could jump onto a runaway cart *and* soothe both of the horses. But the girl simply stroked their manes without boasting. “It’s a good thing these two were trained to respond to voices,” she said.

“I’m sorry to ask this,” said Elliott, “but could you keep the horses calm? The two people on the ground are intruders pretending to be with a contractor.”

“Intruders?! Yes, very well. I understand.” Though she was surprised by the instruction, she nodded without argument.

Elliott removed the key to the west storehouse from his pocket, opened the door, and threw the two unconscious men inside. Then he closed the door again and locked it.

“Good. That should keep them out of trouble. Lady Norton, wait here. I’ll go call security and the faculty.”

Leaving them with clear instructions, Elliott hurried off toward the front gate. He probably figured he’d be faster than Monica, who was slow and bad at explaining things.

After watching him go, Monica looked up at their savior, who was sitting in the driver’s seat, and bowed her head in thanks. “Um, thank you f-for, um, helping us.”

“Don’t mention it. When someone’s in trouble, you have to help them out! You two ran into these intruders, right? That must have been rough.” The girl watched Monica with friendly concern, still holding the reins. Her attitude was unaffected and straightforward. She didn’t fit the image of a noble young lady from Serendia Academy, but she seemed nice.

“I’m Casey Grove, a second-year. What’s your name?”

“I, well, um...I, Monica Norton!” Monica misspoke, and her face immediately went red.

But Casey showed no sign of mocking her. “Monica Norton! So you’re the transfer student I’ve heard so much about.”

Sh-she’s heard about me?! ...I guess I’m the subject of gossip now... Monica’s

face darkened, knowing the rumors couldn't have been anything good.

Casey beckoned for Monica to come up to the driver's seat. "Hey, want to ride up here? It feels really nice."

"Huh? W-w-w-w-wait, no, I, I couldn't..."

"It's easier than riding a horse the normal way. Come on!" said Casey, reaching a hand out toward Monica.

Unable to refuse, Monica nervously stretched out her own hand.

Casey took it and gave it a firm tug. With ease, she pulled Monica up next to her. Monica wondered if she was even stronger than Elliott.

Unused to sitting up front like this, Monica fidgeted as she took a seat and looked ahead.

"W-wow..."

For someone as short as Monica, the world looked positively *fresh* when viewed from up here. Her eyes sparkled in fascination.

Casey, stroking the horses' manes, gave a toothy grin. "The other girls in my class give me weird looks when I say this, but my favorite spot in a cart is the front seat. The wind feels nice, and it's closest to the horses."

She looked at one of the horses as she patted his mane—her gaze was extremely gentle. A sidelong glance at her expression was all Monica needed to tell how much the other girl loved horses.

"Want to try petting one? If you do it right here, it makes them really happy."

"O-okay."

As instructed, Monica stroked the horse's mane. Nero's smooth fur was always pleasant to the touch, and while the horse's firm, glossy mane was different, it had its own charm.

I'm sorry for hurting you before..., she said in her heart before looking over at Casey in the next seat. "Um, Lady Grove, you, um...sure do like horses, don't you?"

"No need for all those stiff titles. Just call me Casey. Can I call you Monica?"

Monica nodded, and Casey thanked her and went back to stroking the horse's mane. "Um... Oh, right. Horses. I love horses, and I love riding them. Back home, everyone rides horses, both men and women. I help transport livestock via cart, too. You know, like 'Old Man Sam's Pigs'..."

Casey paused, startled, and covered her mouth before laughing in embarrassment. "Wait, sorry," she apologized. "You probably don't know what that is. You see, it's a children's song we sing back home when we move our livestock, and—"

"I know 'Old Man Sam's Pigs'!" exclaimed Monica in a louder voice than normal, unconsciously leaning forward. "It's a song about a beautiful, wonderful sequence of numbers..."

Casey blinked a few times, then smiled with her eyes. "I'm surprised anyone else at Serendia Academy knows that song... I'm a country noble, so I don't have much to talk about with the girls here. Not many noble young ladies help move livestock, so..."

She was right—this was Monica's first time seeing a noble young lady who could ride a horse or help move livestock... Though she did know of a wonderful girl who was more than happy to play the part of a villainess.

Casey seemed embarrassed about it, but now that they had a shared topic of interest—"Old Man Sam's Pigs," that is—Monica suddenly felt much closer to her. "You can do, um, all sorts of things, can't you, Casey?"

"Actually, I can hunt, too. With a crossbow."

"That's amazing," breathed Monica. She was hopeless when it came to motor skills, so just being able to ride a horse was more than worthy of respect. *And she can hunt, too!* Monica thought to herself, forgetting the twenty-plus dragons she'd killed in the last several months and looking up at Casey in admiration. "You're pretty amazing, Casey."



SERENDIA ACADEMY SECOND-YEAR

Casey Grove

“Ah-ha-ha. Thanks. I actually wanted to pick horseback riding as one of my elective classes. What about you?”

“Um, I haven’t really decided yet...”

“Then why not take horseback riding with me? It’ll be a lot of fun.”

Monica’s eyes widened. She’d never *dreamed* anyone would recommend that she, someone so obviously clumsy, try riding a horse. “I—I have really, really bad motor skills...”

It was precisely because her physical abilities and sense of balance were both abysmal that she couldn’t use flight magecraft—even though she understood the logic behind its magical formula perfectly.

But Casey paid her no mind, saying, “The teacher said that all students will be taught according to their skill level, and that beginners are more than welcome. And that’s not all! If you act now, you’ll get me, Casey Grove, as an extra teacher! ...Well, only if you want, ha-ha.” She stuck her tongue out jokingly as Monica looked on, eyes wide and mouth gaping. Etiquette teachers would probably scowl at the other girl’s behavior, but it was very charming.

“Ah-ha-ha. Sorry about that,” she said. “Did I come on too strong? There are so few girls in horseback riding that I just thought it’d be nice if you joined us. Got a little ahead of myself.”

“U-ummm...” Monica had never once considered trying to ride a horse. She hadn’t even seen it as an option. But for someone who couldn’t use flight magecraft, there might be benefits to learning horseback riding. And most importantly...

...I want to try new things.

When she’d heard the rules of chess in that elective class, she’d thought, *How simple*. But after actually playing, she’d realized it was anything but—instead, she’d found it full of surprises and excitement.

There was a whole world out there she’d never know about unless she took that first step.

“Could even...someone like me learn to ride a horse?” asked Monica

hesitantly.

Casey grinned and slapped a hand to her chest. “Just leave it to your new teacher, Miss Casey!”

After that, the two of them had a pleasant conversation until security and the faculty arrived on the scene.

Monica usually had a hard time interacting with new people, but she found it easy to talk to Casey. The way she spoke—energetically and without a hint of nastiness—was pleasant to listen to. And even when Monica tripped up on her words, instead of getting mad, she’d just wait for her to finish. She even made sure to bring up topics Monica found easy to talk about.

“Come to think of it, you said something about a sequence of numbers earlier when I mentioned ‘Old Man Sam’s Pigs’...”

“Yes! Exactly! The sequence is famous for how the ratio between every two numbers comes infinitely close to the golden ratio...”

“Oh, I’d never heard that before.”

“Also, it’s a lot of fun to prove the cyclic nature of the sequence’s remainders...!”

“Monica, you’re the kind of person who can’t stop once you start talking about something you like, huh?”

“Eek! I-I’m sorry! I’m really sorry...”

“No, I’m not mad at you. You’re pretty smart.”

Their conversation was nothing more than idle chitchat.

But for the socially inept Monica, her time spent talking with Casey that day was not just fun, but precious.

* * *

That night, in her attic room in the girls’ dormitory, Monica filled out the documentation for her electives. Students were allowed to choose two. She wrote her name more neatly than usual on the chess and horseback-riding applications, then breathed a sigh of accomplishment.

As she gazed at the completed documents in satisfaction, Nero, who had

been curled up on her bed, asked, “So were those intruders today assassins after the prince?”

“No, it was apparently an attempted theft. Serendia Academy spends a whole lot of money on its furnishings.”

“And those dim-witted thieves managed to disguise themselves as merchants and infiltrate, only to suddenly lose control of their horses for no apparent reason, before being thrown to the ground, losing consciousness, and getting arrested by school security, huh?” Nero scratched his head with his hind leg, then looked up at Monica and grinned teasingly. “Still, I gotta say—your panicked face was quite the sight. Have you *never* climbed a tree before?”

“I-if you were watching, then why didn’t you help...?”

“Hey, I couldn’t have done anything in that situation. Not with the droopy-eyed guy and the tail-hair girl there.”

The “droopy-eyed guy” probably referred to Elliott, while the “tail-hair girl” most likely referred to Casey. Nero never put in the effort to remember people’s names.

“At any rate,” continued the cat, “this whole set up is turning out to be pretty inconvenient. I can’t give you much support while you’re inside the school building.”

Normally, Nero would take walks in the academy’s gardens and across its roof while in his black cat form, keeping an eye on Felix’s surroundings. But as a cat, he couldn’t enter the school building, so he wouldn’t be able to help at all if something was to happen inside.

Swishing his tail, Nero seemed to lose himself in thought for a few moments. Eventually, he appeared to have come up with something and hopped down from the bed. “I just had a great idea! If I can’t be a cat, I should just be a person!”

“But don’t you always wear that one robe when you change into human form?” Whenever Nero took on the appearance of a human, he would wear an old-fashioned robe. It would’ve stood out even in town, and it would be still more conspicuous at Serendia Academy.

Nero chuckled confidently, the sound of a meow audible in his laugh. “Sure, I usually go for the robe. But if I try a little harder, I can do other clothes. Check this out!”

Black fog enshrouded Nero, then expanded into the shape of an adult man. Up until then, his transformation wasn’t any different from before. This time, however, the fog remained for a few more seconds. He seemed to be having trouble.

Eventually, the fog began to clear, draining away from the very top of his head like ink washed away by water. Out from it emerged a black-haired young man, but instead of his old-fashioned robe, he now wore the mostly white uniform of Serendia Academy.

...Except it was a girl’s uniform.

The hairy male legs extending from the fluttery white skirt were a lot to take in.

“...Nero?”

“Ack, did I mess up?! Drat! The impression of your uniform is just too strong in my mind... Guess I’ll have to strip some random male student and steal his clothes for observation.”

“You can’t do that. *Please* don’t do that, okay?” said Monica with uncharacteristic firmness.

Nero clicked his tongue in annoyance and frowned.

Within seconds, however, he pounded his palm with his fist as though he’d just thought of something else. He looked down at her. “Hey, Monica. I just had an idea. That, uh, that guy who forced you to do this job... You know. Your colleague? Er, Loui-Loui Lounpappa!”

“It’s *Mr. Louis*, okay? Please remember it.”

“Why couldn’t he have just dressed up like a girl to infiltrate the academy? After all, his hair is pretty long, and he’s got a feminine face. I doubt he’d get caught—”

Despite her certainty that neither Louis nor Ryn was present, Monica

nevertheless paled and covered Nero's mouth with a hand.

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

"Shhh! You absolutely cannot say that out loud!"

Monica's colleague, the Barrier Mage Louis Miller, had long, braided chestnut hair and beautifully feminine facial features. However, he hated when people teased him for looking like a woman. To counter this, everyone said he should just cut his hair short and be done with it, but he stubbornly insisted on growing it out. To Monica, the sheer length of his braid seemed to be a testament to his spite.

"Look, Nero, Mr. Louis is really self-conscious about his looks... The last person who said he looked like a woman, well.....they....."

She couldn't even finish the sentence; the only sound that came out was the chattering of her teeth.

Even Nero's face stiffened at her strange behavior. "Whoa, what happened to them? Finish your sentence. I've gotta know!"

"....."

"Please finish your sentence, or I'm not gonna be able to sleep tonight!"

Ignoring the cries of her familiar (who was currently an adult man wearing a skirt), Monica buried herself under the covers.

The multitudinous deeds of extreme evil committed by the Barrier Mage Louis Miller were a little too hair-raising for Monica to say out loud.



CHAPTER 4

Round and Round

Lindsey Pail was seated at her desk in the faculty room, her head in her hands.

She was the teacher responsible for ballroom dancing, an essential skill for young nobles. Usually, students who enrolled at the academy knew how to dance to some degree right from the start. Of course, there were those who weren't great at it, but they at least knew the fundamentals. Because of that, Lindsey had never had too much trouble teaching them.

Unfortunately, this year, there were two problem children in the second year of the advanced course. Neither of them had any grasp of even the most basic concepts, and when asked to show their skills, their attempt at *something* (it certainly couldn't be called *dancing*), dumbfounded both their classmates and Lindsey herself.

The problem students' names were Glenn Dudley and Monica Norton, and both of them had transferred in this year.

* * *

"I think we're going a little too slow for this tempo, so it's time to speed up!"

"Nooooooooooooooooo! Stopppppppppppppp!"

Once classes were finished, the dance room filled with the shouts of an energetic boy and the shrieks of a miserable girl.

The boy, Glenn, was stepping at double the tempo he was supposed to, while the girl, Monica, was being swung around all over the place.

"And now we turn!"

Glen, a well-built young man, flung Monica's small body into a vigorous spin.

This was no longer a dance—it was a large dog running around to its heart's content while its owner tried to hold the leash but got pulled around instead.

The short boy who had been playing the piano, Neil, was unable to watch any longer and called out, "Excuse me! Stop for a second! Please stop!"

Glenn immediately came to a halt—but his momentum sent Monica sprawling to the floor.

“Monicaaaaa!” shouted Glenn, running over and picking her up in his arms. He shook her slender shoulders. “Ahhhh! I’m sorry! Are you all right?!”

“Ple...please don’t...shake me right now...haaah...”

Monica had already sustained severe damage to the semicircular canals of her inner ear, no thanks to an overly energetic Glenn shouting right in her face, and now she was being furiously shaken. Eventually, her eyes rolled back into her head and she stopped moving.

Casey had watched the whole thing from her spot near the wall. She shook her head, making her ponytail sway, and sighed.

“...That was even worse than before in class,” she remarked.

Serendia Academy’s dance classes were held jointly with two classes participating at a time. Partners were generally decided by the teacher, and their teacher had partnered Monica with Glenn. The height difference between the two of them was obvious, but Ms. Pail’s idea was apparently to first pair up the transfer students and gauge their dancing abilities.

Monica considered herself lucky to have Glenn as a partner, since she already knew him. If she’d been with someone she’d never met, she’d be doing even worse.

“Looks like you’re my partner, Monica! Pleased to dance with ya!”

“Um, y-yes, thank...phew!”

But even with a degree of familiarity, Monica found it difficult to look at a person’s face while talking to them. And this tendency was even more extreme when it came to men.

Nevertheless, Glenn showed no signs of having taken offense. He pulled Monica by the hand and boldly strode out onto the dance floor.

Judging by his unwavering confidence, Monica had assumed he was good at dancing.

However...a moment later, with an utterly affable smile, he’d said, “I’ve never

done ballroom dancing before, so I'll just try and mimic everyone else!"

By the time Monica had thought, *You're kidding, right?* she was already being thrown around.

Thus, the two of them had been ordered to take a retest. If they failed the retest, they would have to take makeup classes every day after school until the school festival. In the worst-case scenario, they might even have to take special classes during winter break.

That would present an obstacle to both Monica's work with the student council and her mission to guard the second prince.

If I can't continue my mission because of something like this, Mr. Louis will be so mad at meeee!

Monica had to pass the retest no matter what.

"Oof... My head is still spinning..."

After finally regaining consciousness, Monica sat on the floor holding her head as Casey bent down next to her and peered into her face with worry.

"Monica, are you okay?" she asked. "Can you stand?"

"Ooh... Yes, I think, um, I'm fine."

Ever since the incident with the thieves dressed as Abbott Company merchants, Casey had seemed to take an interest in Monica and talked to her frequently.

Casey's class shared their dance period with Monica's, and the caring girl had offered to give her some instruction. Casey was a good enough dancer to earn praise from Ms. Pail. Considering how easily she'd leaped onto the runaway cart, it made sense—she had good motor skills.

Monica, on the other hand, not only had slow reflexes from birth but was terribly out of shape as a result of all the time she'd spent cooped up in her mountain cabin. She was so clumsy, she'd trip over nothing at all.

But despite her lack of athleticism, she'd been preparing for dance class in her own way for the past few days.

“Ugh... I read so many books on dancing, too... The ternary system of waltzes... I understand it logically, and yet...”

Patting Monica on the head as she whimpered, Casey gave a pained smile. “Monica, you have to learn to dance by dancing... Also, it’s called three-part time.” After comforting the distraught Monica, she turned to Glenn. “I knew Monica struggled with this kind of thing, but you’re something else yourself. What *was* that?”

“Well, Ms. Pail said boys are supposed to take the lead,” he replied, “so I tried to take the lead in my own way. I wonder what went wrong?”

Thoughtlessly whipping Monica around was apparently his version of “taking the lead.” As Glenn earnestly pondered the situation, Neil gave a dry laugh and said, “There’s a big difference between taking the lead and flinging around your partner, I think...”

“You know,” declared Glenn, full of confidence, “I thought about it, and the way Ms. Pail dances is super sharp and precise, isn’t it?! I think that’s what I’m missing!”

Neil, his expression earnest, said, “Glenn, I think there might be something a little more important than that.”

He was right. Glenn had excellent motor skills, but he danced to the beat of his own drum. Meanwhile, in addition to her hopeless motor skills, Monica had a bad habit of overthinking things.

Casey and Neil—their stand-in instructors—exchanged glances and sighed. “For now, let’s change pairs and practice until you get the steps down, all right? I’ll go with Glenn. We’re similar in height, so it should be easier.”

“Then I’ll pair up with Lady Norton.” Neil nodded before looking at the piano and frowning a bit, seeming troubled. “But then...we don’t have anyone to play the music.”

The dance room had a piano in it, and during tests, the students would dance as someone played. The only other person Monica knew who could play piano was Bridget Greyham, but she wasn’t nearly courageous enough to ask Bridget to play for them.

She barely knew anyone at this academy to begin with. As she stared at the floor, feeling guilty for being useless, the door to the dance room flew open with a bang.

“Oh! Well, in that case, I suppose there is no choice but for me to play the piano for you!”

Using a finger to twirl her flaxen hair, Lana stepped inside. Apparently, she’d been eavesdropping on them from behind the door.

Glenn, Neil, and Casey all looked surprised at the sudden new arrival.

“She a friend of yours, Monica?” asked Glenn

“...Oh... Yes...” Monica nodded, before suddenly going pale.

Wait, will it cause her trouble if I start acting like she’s my friend...? What should I do...?

If Lana made an unpleasant face or frowned even a little... Monica looked down as she imagined the sight.

Lana stomped over, sullenly turned her cheek, and said, “That’s right! And I am going to help *my friend*, so you’d better be grateful!”

Trembling, Monica looked up at Lana.

She didn’t look troubled at all. In fact, she looked like she was trying to hold back a big grin.

Despite herself, Monica felt the corners of her mouth turn up.

“...Thanks, Lana,” she said in a weak voice, squeezing her hand against her chest over her uniform—she felt that if she didn’t constrain it, her heart might leap out in joy.

* * *

The tinkle of a piano could be heard from the dance room. As she passed by on her way through the hall, Lindsey Pail stopped and peeked in through a gap in the door.

...My, my, my!

Inside were two students—the ones behind in class and the very subjects of

her worries—receiving help from their friends and doing their best to learn the steps.

Their moves were laughably awkward, just like Lindsey's had been when she was young and slacking off from her own dance classes!

Listen, Lindsey. Once you make your first appearance in high society, nobody is going to help you anymore.

Her older sister had given her that warning more times than she could count, but young Lindsey had never listened, instead embarrassing herself during dance classes at her all-girls school.

All-girls schools attended by nobles were places of learning, but they doubled as social spaces. Poor dancers would be laughed at from the shadows, and that was it. Nobody would help her. Lindsey had been forced to practice on her own, in secret.

But just beyond this door were boys and girls, joining hands and doing their best to teach each other how to dance.

".....Hee-hee." Lindsey put a hand to her lips and, with a small smile, quietly closed the door to the dance room.

* * *

"I heard from Officer Maywood that you were practicing dance," said Felix with a smile when Monica showed up at the student council room later than usual.

Monica had completely forgotten to inform Felix that she'd be practicing dance after class, but the ever-considerate Neil must have contacted him. Neil didn't stand out much, but he always did a thorough job.

Everyone else was already present except for Elliott, who was nowhere to be seen. Apparently, he'd gone to check in with the *real* Abbott Company about the intruders who had impersonated them.

As Monica thought about what kind of remark Elliott might have made had he been here, Felix addressed Neil. "How did the practice go? Will she be able to pass?"

Neil let his eyes drift from right to left. It wasn't hot, but sweat broke out on

his forehead.

“U-ummm... That really depends...on how much more work she does.”

“Prince,” said Cyril sternly, “if a softie like Officer Maywood is putting it like that, her dancing must be a total disaster.” He was working on a separate task off to the side as he spoke.

Monica couldn’t reply and merely hunched over, dejected.

Cyril was right—that day’s session had been terrible. They’d started by practicing the basic steps, but Monica had gotten her feet tangled and fallen about one out of every three attempts. Casey had told her it was best to learn by doing, but her body didn’t seem to be learning anything at all.

At least with mathematics, she silently lamented, she could get by with memorization. Meanwhile, Bridget hid her mouth behind her folding fan and shot Monica a cold look. “To think a member of this council—all of whom *should* be model students—is falling behind in class and even needs to take a retest. I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“I...I’m, I’m sor—”

“Do you understand how much trouble you’re causing Officer Maywood?” she interrupted.

Monica was causing trouble for someone—hearing those words froze her in place. Her partner, Glenn, had been awful at the beginning, but he had good motor skills, so he’d probably master the steps quickly.

And then Monica would be causing trouble for Glenn, too. If he failed because he happened to be paired up with Monica...

“Um, I don’t consider it any trouble at all...,” interrupted Neil modestly.

Bridget loudly closed her folding fan. Then her amber eyes went to Felix. Her words were biting. “Sir, a student council member failing a simple ballroom dancing test sets a terrible example for the other students. What are your thoughts on this matter? ...At this rate, it will reflect badly on the one who appointed her, don’t you think?”

Felix had been the one to appoint Monica as their accountant, despite all her

flaws. So if Monica caused a problem, it would be his responsibility as the one who had chosen her.

Fear and pressure threatened to crush Monica's small body. *I'm sorry for causing you trouble! I'll work hard! I'll do my absolute best! Please forgive me!* Although many words were whirling around in her head at the moment, none of them made it out of her throat; she just opened and closed her mouth without saying anything.

Felix looked at Bridget and offered a smooth smile. "There's nothing to worry about," he said. "I have high hopes for Lady Norton. I know she'll live up to my expectations. Isn't that right, Lady Norton?"

His last words had been directed at Monica—and with the sweetest smile anyone could imagine.

No, I can't do it..., she shrieked in her mind, barely managing to swallow back the words. If a member of the royal family like Felix had expectations of her, her only option was to meet them.

Nevertheless, she hung her head, unable to readily agree. Felix stood up and walked over to stand in front of her. Then he put his fingers under her chin and lifted it. Monica's hesitant face shone in his mysterious blue eyes.

"You will...live up to my expectations, won't you?"

He added a tinge of loneliness to his voice, which would have made most girls red up to their ears. Monica, though, just looked like she was being threatened. She nodded stiffly, then rallied every last bit of vocabulary she could manage from the recesses of her mind. The important thing about conveying your intentions was to use logical, clear explanations.

"F-first...", she stammered, "I'll analyze the tempo of the songs being used and compare it to the length of my footsteps. I'll also calculate the angles of the legs, waist, and shoulders during the dance and memorize those. That's where I'd like to start!"

On the surface, her explanation might sound logical—but in essence, it was completely nonsensical. Cyril narrowed his eyes and groaned, then said, "...Accountant Norton, you should be using your body, not your brain."

He was absolutely right.

* * *

Back in her attic room, Monica collapsed into her pillow and started sniveling and crying. She wasn't used to exercising, and now her feet hurt.

"You're like a decrepit old lady, Monica."

Nero jumped on top of her and pushed on her back with his paws. He was apparently trying to give her a massage.

"Oof, ugh... Everything hurts..."

"Apparently the younger you are, the faster the muscle pain sets in. Good for you."

Where in the world did he learn that? wondered Monica, keeping her face buried in the pillow.

"You know," said Nero teasingly, "I was peeking in from the window. Dance is...what exactly? A competition to see who can step on their partner's foot the most?"

"N-no... You know what it is. You've seen it in the illustrations in your novels..."

"That's why I was so surprised! I've only ever seen the pictures. I never knew dancing was such an extreme sport."

Nero hopped up onto the desk next to an open book and deftly used his front paw to turn the pages before settling on one and tapping at a particular sentence. *"Julia entrusted herself to Bartholomew's lead and the music. It was like a dream. Hand in hand, they stepped wherever their hearts pleased..."* The characters in this book must've been stepping on each other's feet to their hearts content. Aw, crap—now I'm reinterpreting the whole scene!"

"That's not what it's about... Really..." moaned Monica. She sat up in bed, puffed out her cheeks, and glared at Nero.

The cat, however, simply grinned at her and waved his tail. "Can't you solve the whole problem real easy with a little magecraft? You can use it without chanting, remember? Just use a spell that makes you good at dancing and don't

tell anyone.”

A spell that made one a good dancer... How convenient it would be if such a thing existed! Unfortunately, magecraft couldn't do *everything*.

“...Listen, Nero,” she began. “You could theoretically manipulate your body and force it to take certain actions, but...that type of magecraft is forbidden in this kingdom.”

“You mean like that, uh...that thing from before. Mental interference or whatever?”

“Mental interference magecraft is permitted under certain conditions, but bodily manipulation magecraft is completely forbidden. It has an even stricter penalty.”

Any magecraft that moved a person's body or temporarily strengthened their muscles—basically, anything that affected a human body—was outright forbidden in the Kingdom of Ridill. The reason was that human bodies had no resistance to mana, so using such spells ran the risk of side effects like mana poisoning. Healing magecraft was forbidden for the same reason.

At Monica's explanation, Nero's whiskers twitched. “Hmm. Wait. In *this* kingdom? ...Can you use this stuff in other countries?”

“There is one exception...” Monica paused, before tightening her fists in her lap. “...The Schwargald Empire to the east.”

The Empire, which lay across Ridill's eastern border, was the largest nation on the continent. The young emperor who had taken over about a year prior loathed the old traditions and was implementing one new policy after the next. One of his measures had been to lift the ban on curative magecraft. He had, on a limited basis, permitted research into bodily manipulation magecraft. As a result, body-strengthening and curative magecraft was sure to develop and advance in the Empire.

Above all, though, it was the lifting of the ban on healing magecraft that most influenced mages from other nations. Recently, more and more of them had been leaving their stricter home countries to move to the Empire.

The outflow of talented mages to other nations was a difficult issue for every

country, and it had been a topic of discussion at the Seven Sages' conferences several times already.

"Man, humans sure have a lot of stuff going on," said Nero profoundly, closing the book.

"...Yeah," agreed Monica, once again rolling down onto her side. Her weary body yearned for rest, and once she'd closed her eyes, it didn't take long for the drowsiness to come rushing in.

Forgetting to prepare for the next day's classes, Monica dozed off. As she did so, she once again recalled Felix's beautiful smile.

"You will...live up to my expectations, won't you?"

His words had scratched at old wounds in her heart.

...How could I say yes to that?

She remembered the familiar sight of her father's back as he headed for his desk.

He had been knowledgeable about many things. Mathematics, physics, pharmacy, medicine... He'd studied just about everything, but biology had been his forte.

Listen, Monica. Human bodies are made up of vast quantities of numbers.

If one could analyze the equations that made humans what they were, one could save the lives of many struggling from illnesses.

And so, day in and day out, her father had devoted himself to his research. He hadn't spent all that much time with Monica, but she was happy enough just reading the collection of books he'd amassed and occasionally listening to him talk about his research.

Her father had been a brilliant scholar. He always met everyone's expectations.

And yet, in the end, the populace had reviled him, thrown stones at him, and...

No. No, no!

In her mind's eye, she glimpsed red—the red of fire.

The sight of her father, and of all those numbers he'd accumulated, going up in flames.

He had met everyone's expectations. But he hadn't been rewarded for it.

Monica was the same. In order to meet the expectations of others, she'd learned unchanted magecraft...and the one friend whose praise she'd actually wanted had turned his back on her.

I wish people wouldn't expect anything from me. If I stayed in that deserted cabin in the mountains and just looked at numbers all day, I wouldn't have to feel like that ever again... But...

She abandoned that train of thought and tried to flee into her beloved world of equations, but what came to mind instead was Elliott, who had tried to help her escape the intruders.

Faced with danger, he had nevertheless claimed that it was the duty of nobles to protect commoners and tried to send her away.

Monica, on the other hand, had simply allowed herself to be pulled along in life, becoming one of the Seven Sages, then forcibly being dragged by Louis into her current mission infiltrating the academy. She'd never given a thought to the responsibilities of her position.

Right now, Monica was both the Silent Witch Monica Everett, a Sage, *and* Monica Norton, accountant for the student council. If she turned away from her duty, she had the feeling she'd be stricken with guilt whenever Cyril called her Accountant Norton. If a student council member couldn't manage ballroom dancing, it would set a bad example for the other students—the beautiful Bridget Greyham was right.

"Okay."

Monica rallied her energy to push herself up and off the bed.

Nero, who had been curled up beside her, raised his head in confusion. "Um? Weren't you going to sleep?"

"...I'm going to practice dancing a little more."

As she silently began to move through her steps, Nero grinned at her and waved his tail. “Are you going to practice kicking people after you’re done practicing stepping on their feet?”

“N-no!” insisted Monica, pouting.

Nero hopped nimbly off the bed. A jet-black cloud enveloped him, blending his silhouette into the night as he transformed into a young human man with black hair wearing an old-fashioned robe. Narrowing his eyes—which were still as gold as in his cat form—he looked down at Monica. “Would you like some help, Master?”

“But you don’t have any experience, either.”

“Pfft. I’ve seen it done. I’ll manage. Don’t underestimate my impressive athleticism!”

Nero took Monica’s hands and hummed a tune as they started to dance. His steps were rough and random, but frustratingly, they were far better than Monica’s awkward footwork.

That evening, Monica stepped on Nero’s feet seventeen times, kicked him in the leg twenty-three times, and was ultimately accused of familiar abuse.



CHAPTER 5

It's Mostly Thanks to the Gemsmith

The next day, two more people came to watch the after-school dance practice. Namely, Felix and Cyril.

When they appeared, Lana's cheeks flushed and she gave a shrill "Eek!"

Monica's cheeks went white, and terrified, she cried, *Eek!* silently in her heart.

Neil looked troubled, Casey seemed tense, and Glenn, for his part, just grinned and said, "Oh, it's the prez!" Nothing seemed to intimidate him.

"Wh-what...a-are you, you, you doing here...?" stammered Monica, her voice weak.

Felix's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "I told you I had expectations of you, didn't I? Did you think I was so cold I'd just abandon you after that?"

"That's right!" chimed in Cyril, voice full of pride. "You should be thankful for the prince's magnanimity!"

Shouldn't they be doing student council work...? wondered Monica privately.

Felix glanced at Cyril. "By the way, I don't remember calling you here."

"I am your aide, sir! I should naturally accompany you!"

"But you finished all your council work in advance, even before I told you my plans. Are you sure you didn't intend to come watch Lady Norton's practice from the start, even without me?"

Cyril flushed for some reason at Felix's teasing. His gaze drifted. "W-well, I...I predicted what you'd do, sir! I am your right hand, after all!"

It seemed Felix's aide must always be ready to cater to his whims.

At any rate, Monica wasn't happy about this situation. Her stomach had already started to sting.

Lana shook Monica's shoulders. "Look! Isn't it wonderful? The council president and vice president are both here. Right here!"

Her excitement was probably the normal reaction for a female student of the academy—or so Monica thought, until...

“The prince’s broach—is that peridot?” continued Lana quickly. “Tourmaline? Diopside? Not just any workshop could have produced something that glittery while still retaining so much vivid color. The adornments around it must also be the work of a famous craftsman. I have to make sure I remember this... Ah, I wish I could draw it... Oh! The seal on the clasp of Lord Ashley’s shoes—it’s the kind only engraved on the highest-grade shoes produced by the famous Bart Owen Atelier! I want to get a closer look...”

Lana wasn’t staring at either Felix’s or Cyril’s faces but at their shoes and accessories. Maybe she wasn’t exactly a normal schoolgirl, either.

Monica looked over at Casey. Her usual cheerful smile was gone, and she seemed to be glancing repeatedly at Felix, her face tense. It was only natural to be nervous at the sudden appearance of royalty. Casey’s reaction was probably the most sensible.

As Monica thought about this, Felix cheerfully prompted her and Glenn to dance. “Why not show us what you can do?”

“Got it!” answered Glenn. “Monica, let’s show the president the fruits of our labor!”

Their skills were certainly nothing to be proud of. Where *did* that confidence come from?

Nervously, Monica took Glenn’s hands as Lana hurriedly sat down at the piano and started to play. Casey kept the beat by clapping.

“Okay, on three!”

“A-all right!”

“One, two, three!”

Monica and Glenn both took a step at the same time. Thanks to their intensive training, the beginning of their dance wasn’t bad. But the more steps they took, the more their feet drifted out of sync with each other.

Eventually, Cyril called out, “Stop!”

Ah, I knew it. I'm just so bad at this..., thought Monica, shrinking in the knowledge that he was about to criticize her.

But Cyril's blue-eyed glare was set firmly on Glenn, not her. "Glenn Dudley! You call that leading?! You need to rethink your entire attitude toward ladies!"

Monica couldn't believe what she was hearing from the one who so brutally admonished her all the time. Her eyes widened. She'd been fully prepared for another such scolding session.

Glenn, on the other hand, frowned at the criticism, unhappy. "I was being perfectly polite!"

"You don't even know how to invite a girl to dance! Stay there and watch!"

Cyril shoved Glenn out of the way, then looked down at Monica, who was cowering in fear. Was this all leading to her and Cyril dancing together? *If I step on his foot by accident, he's liable to freeze me alive...*, thought Monica, starting to shake.

Cyril then put his left hand behind his back and bent over at the waist.

"May I have this dance, my lady?"

".....Huh?"

His elegant bow and completely uncharacteristic words stopped Monica's thoughts dead in their tracks. As she was standing there agape, Cyril gently—as though handling delicate glasswork—took Monica's hand in his own.

As Lana began to play, Cyril lightly moved his hand flush with Monica's body. With that movement, Monica instinctively understood the dance had begun. And even without Glenn counting her in, she strangely knew the timing for the first step.

Guided by Cyril's hand, Monica moved her feet. She was so focused on her steps that her upper-body choreography grew sloppy; nevertheless, when her back or arms bent, Cyril's hand would gently correct her posture.

The same went for their direction of movement. Glenn would just say, "Let's go right next!" or "We're gonna hit the wall, so let's go that way!" to direct them, but Cyril didn't say a word. Instead, he used the hand supporting Monica,

his feet, and his gaze to naturally guide her along. He was astonishingly easy to dance with.

When the song ended, Cyril gave another graceful bow, just as he had at the beginning. Then he looked up and over at Glenn...

"See now, whelp?!" he shouted angrily, a look of pride on his face. "*That* is how you escort a lady!" His attitude was completely changed from when they were dancing—this was the Cyril Monica knew.

Without meaning to, she murmured, "...It's nice to see Lord Ashley acting himself again."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean, Accountant Norton?" Cyril's glare swiveled to her, and he cleared his throat. "When it comes to ballroom dancing, the man—or lead—essentially determines the outcome. If he does a good job of it and dances to the music's beat, things will more or less come together."

"Whoa," Glenn said, honestly impressed. "That was pretty great!"

"If you're going to compliment me, look a little deeper into your vocabulary and find some more refined words," responded Cyril. He looked rather pleased but still maintained his aloof, composed manner.

"Vocabulary, huh...," said Glenn, falling into thought for a few moments. Then, straightening out his posture, he began again. "You were like, *shwwwooo*, and then *whup!* Psssht! It was so cool!"

"...You know what? Manners can come second. You need to learn human language first." Cyril narrowed his eyes at Glenn before turning back to Monica. "And you, Monica Norton. You still have all manner of issues to resolve. First, you need to get used to being led. Don't jump at every little thing. Don't hunch over. Don't look down. As long as you *appear* dignified, people will tolerate a surprising number of errors in your footwork."

"O-okay..." Monica had heard the same advice from both their teacher and Neil. Her posture was *very* bad. She was so used to stooping and looking down at her feet. Consciously, she straightened up and checked herself in a mirror.

Felix smiled and offered a suggestion. "In that case, Dudley should practice leading, and Lady Norton should get used to being led. Cyril, would you mind

showing Dudley the ropes?”

“If you say so, sir...” Cyril nodded, a little reluctant. Then he moved over to Glenn and addressed him arrogantly. “Whelp! I’m about to pound my techniques into your head! First, I want you to think of me as a lady and try to lead!”

“Whaaa...?” groaned Glenn. “Think of you as a lady? ...Hmm, nope. Not happening...”

“You don’t always get what you want!”

Cyril dragged him away, shouting at him, as Felix shot Monica a smile. “And so that leaves us, Lady Norton.”

“Y-yes, um... Th-thank you...,” stammered Monica, bowing over and over.

Felix didn’t waste any time reaching a hand toward her. “Come.”

“.....” Monica stayed firmly in place and reached her arm out as far as it would go. She managed to touch Felix’s hand with her fingertips.

Felix looked down at her fingertips, still smiling. “I am feeling a surprising lack of enthusiasm.” His lips may have been smiling, but his azure eyes were not.

“I-I’m sorry! Please lead me!” Trembling, she took just a half step forward. He immediately gripped her hand and pulled her closer.

His hand moved to support her body. As soon as she felt it, Monica tensed up. Her youthful face changed color...not to rose red but to pale white. It looked like she was about to faint.

“You acted a lot more naturally when Cyril was your partner.”

“W-well, that’s... Lord Ashley was acting so differently, I was just surprised...” With Cyril, she’d been shocked into a stupor and the dance had started and ended before she even noticed. This, however, was a different situation.

As she quivered, Felix gave instructions to Lana. “Sorry, but would you mind giving us a song? Play it somewhat quietly. And no need to clap along.”

“R-right away, sir!” said Lana with a nod, a little out of breath as she started to play.

The music drifted toward them, a little softer than before, and Felix, still holding Monica's hand, began to move his feet. It was the same as with Cyril. She didn't need to be counted in—she could instinctively tell when to start. Felix seemed to be skilled at this as well.

"Don't worry too much about your feet for now. If you want, you can even forget that you're dancing at all."

"...Huh? I can?"

"Yes. Just walk as normal and have a nice conversation with me. You're a little too tense at the moment."

The suggestion of a nice conversation left Monica at a total loss. She was *terrible* at talking and terrible at thinking up topics to talk about. She'd never once managed a decent back-and-forth with someone.

As Monica floundered for a topic, Felix brought his face a tiny bit closer and peered into her eyes. "This is the first time I'm seeing your eyes this close up. They look light brown, but I can see just a little bit of green in them depending on how the light strikes... Like dapples of sunlight deep in a forest."

"O-oh, er..."

"And your light-brown hair is very pretty and lustrous today. Did you have your friend do it for you again?"

"No, I did it myself today. Um, I bought a new comb recently, so..."

"Oh? What sort of comb?"

"Um, Lana...er, Lady Colette picked it out for me. It has flowers engraved on the handle..."

Monica generally had a hard time making conversation, but as she remembered buying the comb with Lana, her face naturally relaxed.

Seeing that, Felix gave her a soft smile. "So you *can* smile like that. Let me look more closely."

With him gazing at her full in the face, Monica grew embarrassed. Her eyes began to wander. Eventually, they came to rest on the brooch at the clasp of Felix's cloak.

She recalled Lana talking about it earlier, and she'd been right—up close, it was an extremely elaborate accessory. The stone in the middle had been cut to perfection, and it sparkled beautifully in the room's light.

Gemstones were the most frequently used materials in magical items. The amount of mana they could impart depended on the type of gem, its size, its opacity, and how well it was cut.

I can't see the base of the gem, she thought, but they must have used the very latest methods when cutting it... Usually, a gemsmith prioritizes making the stone's color look as deep as they can, so they leave a lot of stone at the base. But this one has a thin, shallow base so it can reflect light better... You could only do that if the original gemstone's color was very deep...

"I think a green dress would suit you," said Felix. "A deep green, but not too dark. And I bet it would look splendid with some pretty flower embroidery on the skirt. Do you have a favorite flower?"

Fifty-eight facets—you could probably use it for reflective barriers. Reflective barriers aren't typically very strong, and it's said to be difficult to reflect heavier attack magecraft. But if you used this polyhedron, you could increase both the barrier's strength and its reflectivity...

"If you like roses, I think autumn roses would suit you well. Spring roses are wonderfully pale and gentle, but those in autumn have a deeper color, and I think they'd make you stand out even more."

If you were to deploy a reflective barrier using this polyhedron, assuming...for the refractive index, then for a direct hit, the reflectivity would be...

As Monica lost herself thinking about the magical formulae of reflective barriers, the song ended. Felix stopped moving but kept his hands on Monica. Casey and Neil, who had been watching, gave her a round of applause.

"Monica, that was amazing!" exclaimed Casey. "Halfway through, it turned into an actual dance!"

"Yes, your movements became much more natural... That was the best you've done yet!"

At the moment, however, Monica was deaf to their praise—her mind was full

of equations and magical formulae.

Felix offered her a smile as she stared at his broach and thought about magecraft. “You had a tendency to think too much and stiffen up, which threw off your timing,” he remarked. “With the help of a little light conversation, however, you were able to entrust yourself to your partner without overthinking things. Am I right?”

That was when Monica finally snapped out of her reverie, looked up, and glanced around as if she’d just woken from a dream. “Uh... Um... I, er... What was I...?”

“Monica, that was some incredible dancing!” cried Glenn, his eyes sparkling. He had started watching her part of the way through. Cyril nodded as well. “I would have expected no less from the prince.”

Still feeling floaty, as if she were dreaming, Monica put her hands to her cheeks. “I...I danced...properly?”

“Yes. You danced very well.” Felix nodded.

Monica’s cheeks went red as she broke out into a wide smile. “The cutting on your broach’s gemstone reflected the light so beautifully with its fifty-eight facets, I started thinking about its reflectivity and stopped thinking about extraneous things!”

A heavy silence fell over the room.

Monica’s eyes, however, kept on glittering like an innocent child’s.

The ever-affable Neil opened his mouth hesitantly and said, “U-um... Doesn’t that mean you were *only* thinking about extraneous things...?”

“.....Oh.” Monica’s smile froze. Slowly—very slowly—she turned to Felix.

He was technically smiling. But a dark light glistened deep within his azure eyes. “Then I suppose my conversation didn’t matter to you, either. Is that right, Lady Norton?” he asked.

“No! Um, I, er, what I mean is, w-well...,” stammered Monica, immediately starting to fiddle with her fingers. Eventually she balled her hands into fists, looked up, and shouted, “The reason I was able to dance so well was thanks

to.....your broach!"

"Can you at least say it was thanks to the prince?!" yelled Cyril, his words echoing all across the room.

And that was how Monica learned to submerge herself in her own thoughts to get through dance class.

When it came time for the retest, Glenn Dudley and Monica Norton both wore tense expressions. But once the music started, they took their first step with a smoothness that would have made anyone doubt their earlier performances.

Glenn's lead was a little forceful, but it was clear he was putting in the required thought for his partner. And while Monica would immediately trip up before, she was now doing the steps properly and letting herself be led, though some of the awkwardness lingered.

Eventually, the song ended, and Lindsey's face broke into a smile. The thought of saying her next words filled her with the joy and pride of a teacher.

"Congratulations. You've both passed."

Glenn and Monica—and their friends, who had been furtively watching from the hallway—let out cries of joy.

Lindsey smiled at her students and said, "You've done an excellent job putting in the work."

* * *

Serendia Academy was furnished with multiple tearooms. One of them was a private room, for use only by a select few, and inside it, a tea party was currently underway. Its hostess was Bridget Greyham, student council secretary and noble daughter of Viscount Shaleberry.

And she had invited only one person: the student council president and second prince of the Kingdom of Ridill, Felix Arc Ridill.

"Lady Norton passed her retest in ballroom dancing," said Felix casually as he put his lips to the black tea already prepared for him.

Bridget returned her cup to its saucer and unfolded her fan. "That's wonderful

to hear.”

“Didn’t you want her to fail?”

“Why would I be happy about a student council member failing a class?” she responded. That was the correct way to answer the question. Bridget, one of the three most beautiful girls in the academy, let a thin smile creep across her pretty features as she looked searchingly at Felix. “Speaking of dancing... It brings me back. Do you remember how we used to practice together when we were younger?”

“Yes, of course,” answered Felix. “I have fond memories of it.”

“You were such a poor dancer... You stepped on my feet so many times. And you would apologize constantly. Remember?” Keeping her mouth hidden behind her fan, she moved her eyes to look at Felix—almost as though she was gauging his reaction.

He gave her a troubled smile, as if ashamed of his past blunders. “Suddenly bringing up old times... What’s gotten into you?”

“Oh, but I indulge in memories of the past just as much as the next person.”

A tea party with a gorgeous prince and a noble young lady—it was a beautiful sight, like an illustration in a court novel. But although they seemed to be enjoying the conversation, a quiet battle was raging just beneath the surface.

Bridget Greyham was an intelligent girl. She was certainly not someone Felix could dazzle with his looks and position and bend to his will.

“You’ve always been quite clever,” he commented.

“My father doesn’t like that about me. He says he prefers women to be a little duller and more amusing... Do you think that way as well?”

“I like smart women.”

“Oh? I’m honored.” Bridget gave a feigned, high-pitched laugh, then offered a smile that anyone else would have fallen in love with immediately. But her amber eyes were chilly. She was too clever to accept insincere flattery.

Felix raised his teacup to his lips again as Bridget, appearing to have just remembered something, said, “Oh yes. I wonder—is Accountant Monica Norton

included in your list of *smart women*?”

“What do you think? I’d love to hear your opinion.”

Bridget lowered her long eyelashes and thought for a moment, choosing her words carefully. “From my perspective, the girl has the makings of a scholar by nature. If given the necessary equipment, she would boggle the mind. But she is a poor public speaker, and she is not skilled at negotiating. If you thought so highly of her, sir, weren’t there options available to you *other* than appointing her to the student council?”

She really is a smart woman, he thought. At times like these, Bridget was able to understand matters from a logical viewpoint rather than an emotional one—an objective viewpoint rather than a subjective one. She was making an objective claim that Monica was a poor fit for the student council.

She was correct. It was difficult to argue that Monica was suited to be a council member. Her skill at handling clerical work aside, her ability to discuss and negotiate was extremely poor.

The corners of Felix’s lips turned up slightly, his blue eyes slowly narrowing. “When you look at her, do you ever think, *Why can’t she do a simple thing like this...?*”

Bridget neither confirmed nor denied it, instead remaining silent, trying to gauge the other’s true intentions.

Felix gave her a warm smile. “It’s like looking at my past self, isn’t it?”

But even his handsome face and friendly grin weren’t enough to penetrate Bridget’s iron-clad smile. He returned his cup to its saucer and stood. It was still early, but their rendezvous had gone on long enough. “Thank you very much for the tea. And for the pleasant time in your company, Lady Bridget.”

“And you as well... This was very worthwhile. Thank you, Your Royal Highness.”

Smiling, Bridget was every inch a flawless, perfect noble.

As he walked away from the tearoom, Felix breathed a quick sigh... *As usual, I can’t let my guard down around her*, he thought. *Perhaps I gave her a little too*

much this time. Thinking it over, he happened to glance at the window—and what he saw outside made his eyes go wide. “That’s...”

At the rear of the school, Glenn was hard at work. By the looks of it, he was gathering up large stones. What was he doing that for?

Felix had covertly kept up his guard around the transfer student. People had been talking about a passing young mage defeating the earth dragon that had attacked the town of Craeme. That mage’s features matched Glenn’s, so he’d probably been the one to do it.

And he’d transferred in now of all times—a mage powerful enough to slay an earth dragon. If his master was who Felix thought he was, that had to mean *something*.

Either he’s here to watch me or kill me..., he thought to himself.

He’d also been wary of any connection between him and Monica, since they’d transferred in at the same time. The reason he’d offered to help them with dance class was so he could observe them together.

He’d watched the two of them the entire time he’d been helping, but he hadn’t been able to catch anything. For the moment, it seemed they had no connection.

I should probably continue to be cautious of Dudley in the future...

As he thought this over, watching Glenn through the window, Monica, Neil, Lana, and Casey all walked up. Apparently, the entire ballroom dancing practice group was helping Glenn out.

First, they put an iron grating over the stones Glenn had assembled. Then they set a fire below it and quickly started lining up strips of meat on top.

...Oh, wow.

Felix had been planning to go back to the dorm, but he changed course and quickly headed to the rear garden.

* * *

After safely passing the dance retest, Glenn had suggested they have a little celebration party. “I’ll get us everything we need—the venue and the food!”

he'd exclaimed, pounding his chest. Everyone else had thought it would be a tea party, but instead, he secured a place outside, behind the school, and prepared a large quantity of meat. What came next was obvious.

"Can't have a celebration without meat!" said Glenn, adeptly beginning to grill it.

Casey helped him, her own movements swift and sharp. "You're right about that," she said, nodding happily. "Meat's a must." She cut it into slices so skillfully, it was hard to believe she was really a noble lady.

Surprisingly, Lana was enthusiastic about the prospect, too—or at least interested in it. As the daughter of a wealthy merchant, she watched with curiosity as Glenn and Casey got to work.

This was against school rules, but since Lana wasn't about to stop either of them, Monica and Neil—the two council members most likely to go along with the group—could only remain silent and watch over them.

"It seems like it's actually pretty easy to make this stuff," said Lana, looking at Glenn. "By the way, where did you get all this meat?"

Glenn grinned proudly. "Heh-heh-heh. I happen to come from a butcher's family. I just took a little hop back home...er, rather...I had a carriage send me there and back!"

Apparently, he'd used his flight magecraft to fly over and gotten the meat from his family. His master had forbidden him from using magecraft without supervision, but it seemed he'd been flitting about wherever and whenever he pleased.

Confused, Lana asked, "You're from a butcher's family? Did you enroll here to become someone's attendant, then?"

Anyone who could pay the enrollment fee could get into Serendia Academy, even if they weren't noble. Recently it had become a kind of status symbol to bring servants along for advanced education, so it wasn't unusual.

But Glenn shook his head. "I'm a mage's apprentice. And my master suddenly told me, 'Go to Serendia Academy.' Paid for the whole thing, too."

Casey, who was lining up skewers of meat on the grill, looked at him, eyes wide. “The enrollment fee for this academy is insanely expensive. Your master must really be something—I’d imagine they’re an illustrious figure.”

“Illustrious? I don’t know what that means, really, but my master’s super strong—I’ve almost never seen anyone stronger.”

“When you say strong..... do you mean someone like the Artillery Mage, or maybe the Silent Witch, who slew that black dragon?”

Sweating bullets at Casey’s suggestions, Monica remained as silent as her moniker.

Glenn flipped over the meat skewers. “It’s neither of them! Oh, the meat’s looking good. Yep! Here you go!”

Moving the firewood a bit to adjust the level of flame, he handed out the meat skewers to everyone. Taking one for himself, he raised it high into the air.

“All right, now that everyone has one...,” he said, “time to celebrate Monica and me passing the retest! ...Let’s eat!” He opened his mouth wide and chomped down onto the meat.

Monica followed suit, hesitantly putting the meat in her mouth. The perfectly browned mutton had a bit of an odor to it, but the added spices made it easy to eat. She’d never liked mutton that much, but even she had to admit this was delicious.

“I, um... I’m not great with mutton, but...this is, um, easy to eat.”

Hearing Monica’s soft-spoken praise, Glenn sniffed proudly. “Heh-heh. I used a secret spice passed down in the Dudley family. We sell it in stores, too, so give it a look when you can!” he added, making sure to slide in an advertisement, true to his merchant lineage.

Neil, his tone serious, added, “It’s been getting easier to obtain seasonings lately, huh? Though it still depends on what region you’re in.”

Lana stopped eating the meat on her skewer and chimed in. “I think it’s partly due to the town of Southerndole recently expanding their ports... But my father says the Empire is still unsettled after the change in leadership and that some

merchants are waiting to see how things play out. They're staying in a port in this kingdom close to the Empire."

Neil nodded in agreement. "Depending on the Empire's new political measures, there's a chance the merchants will all flood in at once. I've heard the current emperor is putting a lot of progressive policies into effect."

As she listened, Monica idly thought to herself. Now that the Empire had removed its ban on healing magecraft, many mages were crossing the border. Merchants might decide to follow suit any day now. And where people gathered, business prospered. The Empire would likely see even more development going forward.

On the other hand, the Kingdom of Ridill was having to deal with confrontations between the center nobles, who were desperate to maintain the status quo, and nobles in the country. In addition, nobles were divided among three factions—one backing each of the princes.

But I...don't have any interest in political conflict.

As one of the Seven Sages, Monica had been granted the right to have audiences with the ruling monarch in order to speak with them directly. But political power and the state of the kingdom were not on her list of concerns.

I wonder what Mr. Louis wants from me...?

If he'd wanted to make sure the second prince was safe, there were any number of more suitable candidates for the job. And yet he'd purposely sent the inept and clumsy Monica to do it. Why?

He's not... He didn't want to send me here because I'm useless, because I would cause the second prince's downfall, did he...?

That she couldn't outright deny the possibility was what made Louis so terrifying. As she thought about that smooth, wicked smile on her colleague's handsome features, the fat from the meat dribbled all over her hand.

Flustered, she wiped it off with a handkerchief as Lana smiled and said, "You should hold the skewer horizontally when you eat. That way, the fat won't drip on you."

“O-okay...” Monica tilted her skewer horizontally.

Casey, who had been watching them, impolitely licked the fat off her fingers and said, “You know how to eat skewers, huh, Lana? I figured you’d be unfamiliar with things like this. You’re not some rural noble like I am, right?”

“My homeland holds a lot of festivals, so we’re all pretty used to food you can eat while walking around. Though most people raised in the capital aren’t like that, I suppose.” Lana looked at her skewer intently. “There are roasted chestnut stalls and fruit juice stalls in the capital, but I don’t see much in the way of skewers. I bet a skewer shop would be pretty popular...but there are a lot of restrictions on starting businesses and opening outdoor stalls in the capital, so...”

Lana was not only knowledgeable about the latest trends—she was surprisingly mercantile in her thoughts. These were the kind of unexpected facets of a person you never got to see unless the right opportunity arose.

Casey was the caring sort, kind of like an older sister. She was always looking out for those around her, and she was very considerate. Glenn was a little too happy-go-lucky, but he had surprisingly keen powers of observation. Neil was easily caught up in the moment, but he was a sincere, kind person at heart.

Back when she’d attended Minerva’s Mage Training Institution, Monica had refused all contact with others and never tried to learn about them. She’d thought there was no reason to do so, that it was pointless. At the time, she’d never imagined there would come a day when she’d be out secretly cooking meat behind the school building with a group of people.

...The meat is...good. Monica’s face broke into a smile. She bit into the meat, a happy feeling in her heart.

Finishing at a pace more than twice that of Monica’s, Glenn joyfully started cooking some more.

Neil’s eyes went wide. “Glenn, you’re still eating?!”

“That was nowhere near enough food!”

“But I’m already full!” exclaimed Neil, holding his stomach.

Glenn snorted. “You’ve gotta eat more, or you’re not gonna grow big and strong!”

The light faded from Neil’s eyes. “...You just indirectly called me a squirt, didn’t you? ...You did, didn’t you?”

While Glenn was taller than other boys his age, Neil was quite a bit shorter than average. Neil was normally cordial, but now he closed in on Glenn, his expression blank. Glenn shrank back.

That’s a new side for Neil as well. Monica was watching their exchange with a smile, when she heard a voice.

“Hey, looks like everyone’s having fun.”

The group immediately stopped talking and turned toward the voice’s source.

And there he was, unaccompanied: student council president Felix Arc Ridill.

Lana’s and Casey’s eyes shot open. Neil went white and said, “President! This is, um, you see...”

As Neil flailed, Felix lowered his eyebrows and heaved a disappointed sigh. “I swear... Two student council members, breaking school rules in broad daylight?”

One man, however, bravely brandished his skewer and objected—Glenn Dudley, the butcher’s son. “There’s no rule against cooking meat in the schoolyard!”

“Any flames outside of designated areas require a request to be made of the student council.”

“Then since you’re here, there’s no problem! President! Please permit this!” Glenn always did as he liked, but this was a whole new level. It was actually rather refreshing.

Felix kept the rest of the group in his sight as they looked on in suspense. Then, folding his arms, he set his stare on Glenn. “You need to submit the paperwork the day before.”

“Ah, darn. I see. Oh! Would you like one, President?” asked Glenn, smoothly offering a skewer to Felix.

He has no sense of fear! thought Monica as she and the others gasped.

Felix stared at it for a moment...then said, "Sure, I'll have one," and took the skewer.

Quietly, Neil practically shrieked, "He's eating it?!"

Felix deftly bit into the meat on the skewer. He didn't hold it vertically or get the fat all over his hand like Monica had.

"It's quite good," said the prince. "Very well-seasoned." As everyone else looked on in sheer bafflement, he gave them a wink. "Now I'm an accomplice. You'll keep quiet about my little rule violation, won't you?"

Nobody was about to go against the word of a royal. Everyone nodded.

Glenn laughed gleefully. "There's plenty more where that came from! You helped us out with dancing, so consider it thanks! Oh, right—should we call the vice president?"

Neil vehemently shook his head. "L-let's not!"

Monica agreed. If the sensitive, high-strung Cyril Ashley was present, he would surely fly into a rage and start yelling about how inexcusable this was. Or maybe he'd see Felix eating the meat skewer and doubt his own eyesight.



Either way, Monica was having fun, and she didn't want it to end. She secretly cast an unchanted spell to alter the wind's direction, keeping the smoke from the cooking meat away from the school building.

* * *

Once the secret party behind the school was over, Monica returned to her attic room in the girls' dormitory to find a black cat and a maid sitting on the floor and reading together.

"Welcome back, Silent Witch."

The maid closed her book, then glided upward and back down again into a bow. This was Rynzbelfeid, nicknamed Ryn, the spirit contracted to the Barrier Mage Louis Miller. As a high wind spirit, she was particularly adept at flight magecraft, and so she'd been acting as Monica's point of contact during her undercover mission.

This seemed too early for her regular report, however. Did her presence mean an emergency had arisen? Monica tried to hide the tension washing over her.

Nero, who had been reading a book next to Ryn, pushed its cover closed with his front paw and looked up at Monica. "Looks like she brought you a present."

"...A present?" repeated Monica.

"Yes," said Ryn. "I've come bearing a gift from my master addressed to the Silent Witch. Please accept it." She picked up a paper-wrapped object she'd placed near the wall and...

"Dururururu..." With a wonderfully advanced roll of the tongue, she made a strange noise. Was she trying to mimic a drum roll?

Monica was confused, but Ryn continued, her expression impassive. "Pa-pa-pa-paan."

First a drumroll, then a trumpet fanfare. Had a small child done it, it would have been adorable. But a beautiful maid producing those sounds in a monotone was just surreal.

"...Um, er, Miss Ryn? What...what was that?"

"I read in a book that humans play instruments in situations like these.

However, owing to my lack of any such ability, I reproduced their sounds orally.”

She was talking about ceremonies held in castles. Monica had never heard of anyone playing instruments during a regular conversation. And it was a good thing she hadn’t brought any along—if she’d done a drumroll and blown into a trumpet, it would hardly have gone unnoticed.

“In any case, here you are.” Ryn held out a paper-wrapped package tied with a red ribbon.

“Uh, right... Thanks...” Very hesitantly, Monica undid the ribbon. Inside, she found a navy-blue dress and a white coat.

The dress wasn’t the extravagant sort you’d wear to a ball but one for everyday use. Both it and the coat had a simple, unaffected design, but Monica was thankful for that.

“Wow! ...Um, is it really okay for me to...to have this?”

“It is. Lord Louis said to tell you: ‘I suppose you can tell her it’s a reward for capturing Victor Thornlee. You have to know when to punish and when to praise, after all. Ha-ha-ha.’”

Was she supposed to say that last part, too? Monica managed a dry smile, then held the new dress and coat up to her body in turn. They were the perfect size.

Maybe I’ll wear this next time I go shopping with Lana in town, she thought eagerly, bowing to Ryn. “Um, I... Thank you. I’ll write a letter of thanks to Mr. Louis, so please wait a moment.”

After hanging up the dress and coat, she took a seat at her desk and got out her writing implements.

She wanted to properly express her thanks for the dress Louis had given her. Ever since coming to the academy, Monica had made a small goal of getting to the point where she could say *thank you*.

As Monica struggled to write her thoughts, Ryn came up right next to her and said, “According to your previous report, it seems you experienced an incursion

by some individuals pretending to be part of a trading company.”

“Y-yes...”

“In light of this, Lord Louis would like you to submit a security plan for the day of the school festival with your next regularly scheduled report.”

“A...a security plan...?”

He could ask, but Monica knew absolutely nothing when it came to security. She would have trouble with even a simple plan.

Ryn’s light-green eyes studied the girl and her troubled expression closely. “For example,” she suggested, “if you were an assassin, how would you go about killing the second prince?”

“If I were an assassin...? Hmm...” Monica folded her arms and thought about the spirit’s question.

Nero took the chance to jump onto the desk and say pridefully, “If Monica were an assassin, she wouldn’t need to go creeping around at all. She could just blast a super-high-powered attack spell at the academy from far away and it would be over in an instant.”

“...Nero, that’s not how assassinations work,” said Monica, taken aback by her familiar’s over-the-top suggestion. She then repeated what Louis had told her before. “Look, this school has a defensive barrier around it. You can’t attack it from the outside.”

“Is that right?”

“Mm-hmm. Mr. Louis has a barrier up around basically every important facility in the kingdom, so we shouldn’t have to worry about an attack from outside.”

Louis Miller was known as the Barrier Mage. As his name implied, barrier-related techniques were his area of expertise. The scale, strength, precision, and duration of his barriers far outstripped what anyone else could manage. This academy, too, boasted a large barrier into which Louis had put his time and work.

“...I think it’s probably a wide-range, large-scale defensive barrier with an

added detection formula. Normally it's inactive, but when it senses an attack from outside, it immediately goes up. It's probably hidden somewhere secret, where it will be really hard to find."

But the barrier had weaknesses—while it could deal with attacks from outside, it couldn't respond to ones carried out inside. Once in the academy, a criminal could also rewrite the barrier's formula and render it useless.

Sensing Monica's concern, Ryn said flatly, "That will not be a problem. Nobody could rewrite the barrier in the first place."

"Wh-why...not?"

"At a previous time, Lord Louis was reclining in his chair and said the following." Here, the spirit sat up straight and replicated Louis's speech in her own monotone voice. "'My defensive barriers have deadly traps installed. If someone wants to rewrite one, they're welcome to go ahead and try. Ha-ha-ha.'"

As Ryn impassively reproduced these words, Nero narrowed his eyes and groaned. "...What is that guy doing, packing a barrier with deadly traps?"

"Apparently, there was an incident at another building wherein an intruder attempted to rewrite the magic formula. Thus, Lord Louis decided to embed a trap that would activate when someone tries to rewrite it."

That's a very Louis-like thing to do, thought Monica with a strained smile.

Nero looked up at her, astonished. "A killer barrier? Never heard of such a thing. Man, the Seven Sages really are a big bunch of crazies, eh?"

".....Haaah."

Monica had no response to that.



CHAPTER 6

A Cup out of Place

After overcoming the mountainous obstacle of the ballroom dancing retest, Monica nonetheless had no time to relax, for her next trial had already arrived. And it was just as important a part of any noble girl's upbringing as dancing: tea parties.

Serendia Academy had several uniquely aristocratic, mandatory classes absent from normal schools, such as ballroom dancing. One such class taught tea parties, and only the girls took it.

For the daughters of noble families, tea parties were not simply opportunities to indulge in pleasant, light conversation. In social circles, one's skill at entertaining guests and being entertained in turn showed one's dignity and grace. In the class, one would have etiquette pounded into one's brain, then be given the opportunity to use it in practice.

These practice sessions would be held in the center courtyard. Female students of the same year would split into groups of four or five and sit at a single table. Each of them would bring her own tea, then compare and evaluate.

However, the teacher would specify in advance what tea snacks would be served. This meant the first challenge was preparing tea that went with those snacks. Students had to bring their own leaves for class, but most noble girls would just have their servant go out and buy them.

Monica, however, didn't even know where to look. So this time, she turned to her collaborator: the daughter of Count Kerbeck and self-professed villainess, Isabelle Norton.

"...And so, well, I was wondering if you could spare a few tea leaves."

After Monica explained the situation to Isabelle in her room, Isabelle's cheeks flushed rosy pink. She was clearly filled with emotion. "Oh, but it's an honor to help *you*, my sister! Yes, yes! Just leave this to me! I shall do my utmost to ensure that you overcome all the class's challenges!"

“Th-thank you...,” said Monica, bowing her head.

Isabelle’s servant, Agatha, set down a cup of tea in front of Monica. The scent of citrus wafted up from the cup to Monica’s nose. Agatha, the youngest of Isabelle’s servants, smiled at Monica like a dependable older sister. “I shall teach you how to brew black tea. Normally, I would do it myself and serve you, Lady Monica, but...if I did that, it would contradict your cover story of being tormented by House Kerbeck.”

You were allowed to brew your own tea during class or have a servant do it. That said, the students mostly had their servants make it for them. Those who brewed it themselves were seen as third-rate nobles who couldn’t afford to bring a servant with them.

In Monica’s case, however, her cover story was that Isabelle constantly tormented her, so it wouldn’t be natural for her supposed tormentor’s personal servant to come and help her.

“Th-thank you...for teaching me...,” said Monica, bowing deeply to Agatha.

“It’s perfectly fine! Please, no need to bow,” Agatha replied.

Both noble and servant were very considerate, though it was a little difficult to approach them when Isabelle was playing the villainess.

“Hee-hee! Oh, I wonder what tea I should prepare for you... Have they specified any snacks?”

“Um... They said it would be cream cake and light fare.”

Isabelle nodded, putting her finger to her chin and thinking this over. Part of the class was to choose tea that would go well with the snacks. That said, Monica wasn’t accustomed to drinking black tea to begin with. As a result of her father’s influence, coffee was much more her go-to beverage.

“U-um, if those are the snacks...what would be the proper thing to pair them with...?”

“If light fare is being served, I would use young leaves to make black tea with a refreshing flavor,” suggested Isabelle. “It would be safest to avoid flavored teas. As for additives, you could drink it straight or make it into an unsweetened

milk tea. However, my sister...”

She paused, then looked seriously at Monica and said, “An individual’s tastes are important when it comes to pairing teas to snacks. There are no clear right answers—but there is one clear *wrong* one.”

What did she mean? There was no right answer, but there was a wrong one? Monica was confused.

“The *wrong* answer,” declared Isabelle, “would be to bring the same thing as someone else at the table.”

“...Oh.”

The practical part of the class involved forming groups of several people, with each person bringing their own tea leaves. It would certainly be awkward to bring the same type as someone else.

“And you *especially* want to avoid bringing the same thing as anyone of a higher status. Strictly speaking, even the dress you wear, your hairstyle, and your accessories should be carefully chosen to avoid overlap while still following trends...but since you’ll be practicing in your school uniforms, we can limit our considerations to only the tea leaves.”

Monica shuddered. That was...a *lot* to think about. As one of the Seven Sages, she’d attended state ceremonies and the like, but the formal dress for a Sage was a ceremonial robe, so they just had to wear what the kingdom gave them. Hence, she’d never worried about what clothes to wear to a social function. Apparently, the tea parties that noble girls had were heavier in the “mental battle” department than she’d assumed.

“The most certain way to go about it would be to ask those who will be at your table in advance... Who would happen to be sitting with you, my sister?”

“Um... Including me, it’s a group of four. Lady Lana Colette from my class, Lady Casey Grove from the next class over...and I don’t, um, really know the other one.”

“In that case, it will be difficult to casually ask what sort of tea she’ll have.”

“I-I’m sorry...”

Lana and Casey would gladly tell her what tea they planned to bring, but Monica didn't have the courage to go up to someone she barely knew and ask her directly. What's more, she didn't know the fourth girl's family status, so if she spoke to her without thinking, the girl might assume she had no manners. In the world of the aristocracy, speaking plainly to someone above your station was seen as taboo.

"My sister, have they decided the order in which you will be treating the others to tea?"

"Y-yes. I'll be the last one..."

"In that case, I believe you should bring two kinds of tea. That way, you can make sure you don't overlap."

"Th-thank you so much... Tea parties seem like a really big deal..."

Monica already seemed exhausted, and Isabelle looked worried as she nodded. "Indeed they are. Even if you take the time to investigate the other attendees' tastes, relationships, and interests, you must expect the unexpected... Just like a heroine who puts everything she has into her first tea party, only to have it all ruined by the wicked villainess!"

The last part had probably come from a book Isabelle had read recently. Monica wasn't sure how to respond; she just smiled vaguely.

Agatha, her face the picture of seriousness, offered some advice. "Lady Isabelle, in the future, Lady Monica may have many opportunities to encounter villainesses aside from you. To prepare her for such events, why not teach her about how villainesses operate?"

"...Huh?" muttered Monica, her face tensing.

Across from her, Isabelle's face lit up. "Oh!" she said, putting a hand to her cheek. "Yes, what an excellent idea! After all, you are *my* heroine, my sister! Your future may well involve another villainess inviting you to a tea party and tormenting you...!"

That was definitely a future Monica wanted nothing to do with. Realistically, though, she couldn't say for sure it would never happen. She'd been appointed to the student council very soon after transferring here, after all. That, plus Felix

helping her practice dancing, had turned the majority of female students here against her. The only students in her grade who would speak to her normally were Lana, Casey, Glenn, and Neil.

These days, those around her tended to look at her in one of two ways. Some scorned her and saw her as an enemy, while others watched her from a distance, considering her a weirdo beyond their understanding.

Monica, who was clearly a commoner, had managed to avoid suspicion thanks to Isabelle's fake bullying—and thus no one had pried too far into her circumstances. But several times now, she'd met with a mean remark as someone passed her or been laughed at from a distance. Those around her had recognized her as Isabelle's prey, however, so few would come after her directly... *But that might not hold true forever.*

"Well then, my sister. I shall explain all about a villainess's behavior patterns to help protect you during confrontations with *true* villainesses."

Defeating your enemy started with knowing your enemy—or so Isabelle claimed. If Monica learned all about villainesses now, that knowledge might help if something happened... Though, to be honest, she hoped that day never came.

Monica straightened her posture, intent on listening to what Isabelle had to say, when—

"Ohhh-ho-ho-ho-ho!" Isabelle covered her mouth, bent her upper body back, and let out a high-pitched laugh.

The volume of it almost made Monica jump out of her skin. Isabelle finished laughing and smoothly corrected her posture. "This is the first basic action a villainess might take—the high-pitched laugh. By laughing in such a way, they can intimidate someone, distract them, and simultaneously regain their poise!"

"I—I had no idea that laugh served so many purposes...," said Monica in earnest surprise.

Isabelle nodded as though it all made perfect sense. "But its effects wane when overused, so it has to be saved for the perfect moment."

I see, thought Monica. *A special technique that relies on timing.* She nodded

to herself.

Her collaborator then unfolded her fan. “And here is the second of a villainess’s basic actions—the silent sneer!” With flowing motions, she brought the fan up to her mouth and put on a mocking grin. It was full of pride and clearly derisive—which spoke to her own skill at acting and expressiveness. She could put stage actresses to shame.

“Normally, proper etiquette demands we hide our mouths fully when smiling. But for this move, you lower the fan slightly so that the person you’re sneering at can see your mouth. By doing so, you can make your derision clear!”

It’s all so detailed! thought Monica, shocked. *I never would have thought a simple action could be so minutely calculated!*

“Of course, you can conceal your mouth and let out a breathy giggle to convey your distaste for the person, too. You’ll want to use different methods depending on what sort of villainess you are playing.”

“I—I see... This is all very deep.”

“Indeed it is! And the more you try to master it, the clearer its true depths become.”

To repeat, they were talking about villainesses. Isabelle put much more stress on this lecture than she did on teaching Monica how to brew tea, and the explanation lasted long into the night.

Monica had no way of knowing that this young lady, so keen to pour her heart and soul into playing the villainess, actually had the highest grades out of all the first-year students in hosting tea parties.

* * *

Held in the courtyard, the mixed-class tea-party practice for the second-year students involved several tables fully laid out for tea. The tea served at this party was to be prepared in the tea-party prep room on the first floor of the school building.

Servants were generally the ones in the prep room brewing the tea, but Monica, without such help, had to do it herself. She would be going last in the order, so she’d have to leave the tea party midway through to prepare her own

tea, but she also couldn't take her jars of leaves with her to the party itself. So instead, she decided to stow them in the prep room in advance.

Several servants were already inside brewing tea. Almost nobody in the room was wearing a school uniform. Monica shrank in the awkward atmosphere, looking for somewhere to put her jars down, when someone tapped her on the shoulder.

Startled, she spun around—then immediately sighed in relief. It was Casey.

"Did you come to put away your tea leaves?"

"Y-yes!"

"Me too. I guess everyone really does have their servants make the tea. Being a poor country noble, I didn't bring one with me," said Casey, putting her jar of leaves on a shelf and slipping a piece of paper with her name on it underneath.

Oh, thought Monica. That way, nobody will take hers by mistake.

"Want to use a piece?" asked Casey. "There's extra."

"Th-thank you...," stammered Monica, gratefully taking the paper and folding the edges several times into a bellows shape. That way, she wouldn't have to write her name on it like Casey—the unique folds would signal which one was hers. She slid the paper underneath, then set her two jars of tea leaves on top of it. Nobody would mistake the jars for their own now.

"You brought two different kinds?" Casey asked, surprised by the number of jars.

Monica fidgeted, playing with her fingers. "I figured it would be bad, um, if I brought...the same thing as someone else, so..."

Casey seemed impressed with her answer. She pounded a fist into her palm in understanding. "Ahhh, I get it. That's possible, huh? Wow, I didn't think at all about what would happen if two people brought the same kind. That's really smart of you, Monica."

"N-not at all..." Isabelle had been the one to teach her that. She mentally thanked her false tormenter once again.

Casey checked the clock on the wall. "Oh no! We have to go or we'll be late

for class. Let's hurry! If we get there late, Lady Claudia is bound to say mean things to us."

"...Lady Claudia? Um, is she...the one with us...?" Apparently, a person named Claudia was their group's fourth member for the tea party. "What kind of... person would this Lady Claudia happen to be...?"

Casey tried to force a smile, failed, and instead made an uncharacteristically sour face. "What kind of person...? Hmm... Well... Yeah. She's really well-read and knowledgeable about everything. Some even call her the Walking Library. But her personality is... Well, you'll find out when you meet her!"

Who could this noble girl be that even the cheerful Casey had to beat around the bush when describing her?

W-wait... It couldn't be a villainess, like Lady Isabelle said, could it...?! What if she does the high-pitched laugh at me right away...? No, I have to stay strong and confront her..., thought Monica, secretly holding her breath.

* * *

Beneath a beautiful, clear autumn sky, tea-party practice began in the courtyard. Though they called it an exercise, this was an elite academy—the table settings all consisted of first-rate items, and every table was decorated with gorgeous flowers, each in a different color. The tea sets and flower vases were of the highest quality; you could even draw comparisons to court parties. If not for everyone wearing school uniforms, a casual observer might have been fooled into thinking that's exactly what it was.

The female students were sampling the teas they had brought while having light, peaceful conversations. Whenever the teacher came around for grading, they'd talk about the tea, or the tea set, or seasonal flowers, but once she left the table, they reverted to talking about the latest trends or gossiping about romance. One of the particularly popular topics was, of course, the second prince and president of the student council, Felix Arc Ridill.

Caroline Simmons, daughter of Count Norn, talked about him as if enchanted, her caramel-brown hair swaying as she spoke. "I'm absolutely certain the prince will choose his fiancée before he graduates."

The other girls happily picked up this thread.

“Who do you think would be most suited to him?” one asked.

“What about Lady Eliane from the House of Duke Rehnberg?” suggested another. “They’re close in terms of bloodline.”

“Lady Bridget seems a suitable choice as well, given that she’s on the student council with him.”

All the names the girls suggested as fiancée candidates for the second prince were noble girls who reigned supreme at the academy. Still, deep down, they all fantasized about the prince picking *them* as his lifelong companion—Caroline included. Every girl who attended the academy entertained the same dream at one point or another.

How wonderful it would be for that handsome prince to smile at you or extend his hand to you at a ball!

For such dreaming maidens, the next thing to do was bring up the *least* suitable match for the prince and put her down in order to retain their pride.

“Oh yes, speaking of others on the student council... Have you heard about *her*?” said Caroline, lowering her voice from behind her fan.

The other girls’ eyes automatically sharpened as well. *Her*—a transfer student, and yet she’d been picked for the student council. Monica Norton.

“I heard the prince gave her dance instruction.”

“I saw it as well! She danced with Lord Cyril, too, I heard!”

“Receiving a lesson from both the prince *and* Lord Cyril? ...Who does that girl think she is anyway?”

“I’m certain she’s an uppity country bumpkin who forced the kind and gentle prince to go along with it.”

“She doesn’t even have a servant to make tea for her. Isn’t she the least bit embarrassed?”

“Just you watch—she’s sure to make a fool of herself during class.”

Caroline and the others giggled, concealing their malice behind their splendid fans. Making fun of Monica Norton like this set Caroline’s feelings a little more

at ease.

Monica Norton..., she thought. *It's all her fault that Lord Cyril scolded me and I was made to submit a letter of apology.*

When Monica had first transferred in, Caroline had been criticized as the one at fault in an incident where Monica had fallen down the stairs. It was true—on the landing, Caroline had shoved Lana, who then bumped into her hanger-on Monica, who had fallen down the staircase. But it was Monica's fault to begin with for being so dull and clumsy.

How she disgusts me. Having her on the student council is a total mistake. I know it. A complete and utter mistake... Just you wait, Monica Norton.

* * *

As Monica took her seat, she noticed a strange mood hanging over the table. Actually, one of the girls was producing it all on her own. And surprisingly, it wasn't Monica, nor was it Lana or Casey.

It was the black-haired young woman who sat in the highest position at the table: Claudia.

Even to Monica's eyes, which were all but blind to matters of physical beauty, the girl was plainly gorgeous. She had perfectly straight black hair and deep-blue eyes that looked like lapis lazuli. Her features were so pretty, she looked like a masterpiece, a result of some divine being's labors; she was every bit as beautiful as Bridget Greyham. If Bridget, with her shining blond hair and amber eyes, was like a large rose, Claudia was like an iris, exuding a mystical beauty.

And that gorgeous, eye-catching noble girl was giving off such a heavy, melancholic air that one might have guessed her entire family had just died.

Once Claudia's servant had distributed her tea to everyone, she put a smirk on her deathly white face and said, emphasizing each word, *"...Please drink up."*

The way she smiled was like an evil witch urging a good, innocent person to drink poison. But a moment later, it was like her strings had been cut—her face went expressionless again. What was strange was that, despite her lack of expression, Monica could still keenly sense a listless melancholy emanating from her person.

Monica had been worried for nothing—there had been no shrill laughter. In fact, the depressing girl seemed to possess neither the spirit nor the motivation to do so. Judging by her attitude, speaking was too much of a bother to warrant her effort.

People called Monica gloomy, but Claudia really took the cake in that department. Others' impressions of Monica stemmed from her shyness and poor speaking abilities, but Claudia was purposely emanating a full-bodied aura of depression that made it nigh impossible for anyone to talk to her.

Because of that, it felt as though a single, heavy cloud hung over their table.

Monica, Lana, and Casey all drank the tea without saying a word. It smelled nice. But perhaps because of the strange tension in the air, they couldn't figure out what it tasted like.

Monica groaned to herself. *This is so awkward...*

"This tea is delicious! What kind is it?"

The one to break the heavy curtain of silence was Casey. Having picked up on the strange mood, she resolved to make conversation anyway and addressed Claudia with a smile.

Her eyes still down on her teacup, Claudia muttered her response to the energetic Casey. "...The most frequently enjoyed black tea in the kingdom. Not even worth talking about."

"....." Casey's smile stiffened.

This time Lana chimed in, her tone bright. "H-hey, I love milk tea. Is there any milk?"

"...These leaves aren't suited for milk tea. Is your tongue so stupid, it can't understand that?"

"....." Lana kept smiling, but you could see her temples tense in irritation.

The mood at the table rapidly worsened, and Monica's lips trembled as she sipped her tea. She couldn't taste it at all now.

The awkwardness continued. Eventually, Casey—whose turn was second—left her seat to brew her tea, then came back and poured some for everyone

present. She'd prepared a black tea with a somewhat dark color. It was known for having a rather bitter taste, making it go well with milk.

Lana, up next, had brought a brightly colored tea. It was light and had a refreshing, fruity sweetness.

"Lana, your tea is delicious," said Casey. "It's so light—I really like it."

Monica nodded in agreement.



SERENDIA ACADEMY SECOND-YEAR

Claudia

Lana put her cup to her lips, a proud expression on her face. “Well, I ordered the classiest tea of the season, after all. It’s only natural you’d like it,” she said, shooting glances at Claudia. It must have been a jab at her, since she’d brought a very plain, commonplace tea.

The strong-willed Lana didn’t seem to appreciate Claudia’s attitude, so she’d been making stinging remarks about her here and there for a while. Casey, being more considerate, would gently placate her and change the topic, managing to hold the table together.

In the first place, the one in the highest position was supposed to be acting as the hostess for these tea parties. Monica didn’t know who Claudia was, but apparently, she was a higher noble—coming from at least a count’s lineage. Normally, that would make her the one responsible for coming up with topics and moderating the group.

But she seemed to have no energy, and on the rare occasions she opened her mouth, all that came out was scathing commentary. It was making conversation practically impossible.

Eventually, Claudia muttered, “...Drinking something with such a strong flavor numbs the tongue, dulling later tastes.”

Monica recalled the flavor of the tea Claudia had prepared and gasped in realization. *That plain tea that everyone’s used to drinking... Did she decide on that for our first cup in order to avoid numbing our tongues?*

Lana and Casey both seemed to have realized the same thing and looked at Claudia in surprise. Under their stares, Claudia made a face as if what she had said was of no particular importance. She took a sip of Lana’s tea. “...Florendia’s Golden Chips... Out of all the black tea you can obtain in this season, this is the most expensive.”

“Th-that’s right,” said Lana, raring to fight.

But Claudia didn’t even look at her. She lowered her eyelids and said, “If you’d been the sole hostess for a party of nobles, it would have been the perfect choice...but for an invitee, it’s clearly out of place.”

“What?!”

“If you’re the only one who brings extremely expensive tea leaves...others at the table might well think you’re trying to mock them.”

Lana’s face went red, and she started to tremble.

Casey quickly chimed in. “I-it’s fine! I don’t think that! Right, Monica?”

“Y-yes... I don’t, um, think that way!” squeezed out Monica with all her might.

Claudia slowly moved her head to look at Monica. Monica could see herself reflected in Claudia’s cold, unblinking lapis lazuli eyes. “...And I suppose all you can do is agree with your friends.”

“Hwah?!” The way she said it made it seem like Monica was agreeing only because Casey had urged her to do so. Tears forming in her eyes, Monica shook her head vigorously. “N-no, that’s, that’s not... I...”

As a whimper escaped Monica’s throat, Lana finally slammed her hand down on the table. “Hey, give it a rest already! Every time you open your mouth, it’s to insult us! I think *you’re* the one who’s out of place here!”

Lana’s courageous shouting didn’t even garner a twitch of Claudia’s eyebrow. In fact, the gloomy beauty kept her gaze on her teacup, as though Lana wasn’t even worth looking at. “...You seem to think you deserve to be spoken to.”

“What?!” Lana scowled, glaring at the other girl.

Claudia paused for a good several seconds before listlessly continuing. “... Have you heard of the Silent Witch?”

Monica’s heart nearly stopped. It almost certainly skipped a few beats. Heard of her? She *was* her.

“A genius mage appointed to the Seven Sages at the young age of fifteen. She learned unchanted magecraft, and while she attended Minerva’s, she developed more than twenty new magical formulae...but she’s also famous for never attending any conferences.”

That was because places with lots of people scared her, so she’d always try to avoid them.

“...Even during the Silent Witch’s induction into the Seven Sages, she didn’t say a single word.”

That, too, was because of her shyness and social anxiety. Monica had been so useless that her colleague, the Barrier Mage Louis Miller, had done all the greetings in her place. As she recalled it, she felt a cold sweat run down her back.

Claudia flatly continued. "...Have you read the Silent Witch's essays? You can learn a lot about her personality from them... She's a very intellectual, wise person. *She* knows the value of staying quiet."

I'm not intellectual or wise or any of that! I'm just shy and unsociable; I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry...!

As Monica blanched and trembled next to her, Lana glared at Claudia, making no effort to hide her disgust. "Really, now? So you're saying a smart person wouldn't speak to an idiot, is that it?"

Eeeep!

Lana's remark had been directed at Claudia—not the Silent Witch—but Monica still shrank back, still shaking.

Claudia barely seemed to register Lana's words as she shot a sidelong glance at Monica. "...Come to think of it, the Silent Witch's name is Monica Everett... The same first name as you, Monica Norton."

Eek! Monica froze. Her heart was pounding noisily. She couldn't stop sweating.

Claudia looked directly at Monica as her lips curled into a smirk. "...You've been keeping silent for a while now. Is it because you don't want to speak with imbeciles?"

"I...I'm going to, um, g-go put on my tea nowph!"

Stumbling over her last word, Monica noisily jumped out of her seat and practically scrambled away.

Claudia watched her go, her lapis lazuli eyes following Monica the whole way. Ever since this tea party had started, Claudia had, for the most part, kept her eyes down. But there was one person she had looked at directly, and only one—a fact all those present had failed to notice.

Walking quickly down the hallway, Monica clutched at her madly beating heart through the fabric of her uniform. *D-does she know? Does she know I'm the Silent Witch...?*

She'd hidden her face basically ever since becoming one of the Seven Sages and had ventured into public places only when absolutely necessary. Only the other Sages should have been able to recognize her.

Or maybe Claudia was someone she'd known from Minerva's? Then again, the shy Monica had spent most of her time holed up in the labs. If she'd seen anyone as gorgeous as Claudia, she was pretty sure she'd remember.

It...it must be a coincidence... The topic just happened to come up. That's all, she told herself, opening the door to the tea prep room. Fewer people were inside than earlier. Most of the maidservants were probably serving at the party itself.

A little relieved at the lack of people around, Monica walked up to the shelves where she'd put her jars.

"...Huh?"

Looking up, she froze. Her jars were gone.

Casey's jar was in the same place as Monica remembered. The spot right next to it, where she'd put her own, was completely empty—even though she'd put the bellows-folded paper underneath.

A terrible premonition settled over her, and she felt her blood run cold. This was not the first time Monica had encountered such a situation. She had a good guess as to what had transpired.

Hands shaking, she opened the wooden lid of the garbage bin and gasped softly. Mixed into all the used tea dregs were the unused leaves from her two jars, scattered all over the trash, including the paper she'd folded.

"...Oh no."

Helpless, she fell to her knees. Without those leaves, she couldn't make the tea. And without the tea, she couldn't go back to class.

...Wh-what should I do?

Tears began to form in the corners of her eyes. No matter how talented a mage she was, she couldn't turn back time. Choking back her whimpers, she sniffled as a familiar voice spoke to her from behind.

"Monica, are you all right? Do you feel sick?"

A girl knelt down next to her and began to rub her back. It was Casey. "What are you doing here?" asked Monica in a tiny voice, to which Casey scratched her cheek awkwardly.

"Well, when you didn't come back, I got worried, so I came to take a look... Actually, sorry. That's just the excuse I used. I really couldn't stand to stay at that table..."

That made sense. Casey couldn't bear the explosive tension brewing between Lana and Claudia, so she'd slipped out, saying she was going to check on Monica.

Casey looked at the tea leaves strewn through the garbage bin and seemed to intuit what had happened. She frowned and glared at the bin. "That's horrible... Who would do something like this?"

Casey took out a handkerchief and wiped Monica's tears for her, speaking in a gentle voice, like the kind you'd use for a very young child. "Hey, do you have any spare leaves back at the dorm? It can just be some regular tea, as long as you have something..."

"...I don't."

Monica didn't drink tea regularly, so she didn't have her own stock of it. Isabelle would probably share some more with her if she asked, but she was in class right now.

As she continued to snivel, Casey thought for a moment, then picked up her own jar of tea leaves. "Use my leaves. We'll end up using the same tea, but it's better than not serving anything at all."

"...B-but if we use the same tea, won't that make trouble for you...?"

If they used the same type of tea leaves, the teacher would assume they hadn't adequately prepared. If that happened, it wouldn't only be Monica

losing points—Casey would, too.

Casey seemed quite indifferent, though. She waved her hands. “Don’t worry about that stuff. It doesn’t matter what kind of tea you serve at a tea party, as long as it’s good and everyone has fun. That’s the most important part, isn’t it?”

Monica sniffled and looked at her tea leaves in the garbage. Casey was right. Most importantly, if she went back to her seat without having prepared any tea, she’d fail the class.

...But...

She bit her lip, balled her hands into fists, and stood up on trembling legs.

Then she turned around and dashed out of the prep room.

“Monica! Where are you going?!”

“I-I’m sorry! I’ll be right back!”

With that, Monica took off toward her dorm room.

* * *

Glaring at Claudia, Lana chewed a bite of cake—one of their tea snacks—still clearly irritated. Claudia’s gaze had closely followed Monica as she left, but once the other girl was out of sight, the table had lapsed back into that melancholic, listless mood. Claudia’s downward gaze, obscured by her long black eyelashes, gave an ephemeral quality to her beauty.

...What is this? What is this? What is this? Lana bit her lip and looked down at the cup of tea she’d prepared.

Her father was wealthy, but he wasn’t a noble by birth. He’d come from an affluent mercantile family. After contributing to the town’s development, his deeds were acknowledged, and he was granted a peerage shortly before Lana was born.

Ever since Lana was aware, she’d grown up receiving all the finest luxuries and most fashionable dresses. Everyone spoke of her as being a happy, lucky young lady.

But Lana had been all alone.

Among children from houses without noble titles, the dolled-up Lana was

always conspicuously out of place. She had trouble finding a spot in the other children's social circles, and they talked behind her back, calling her a haughty rich girl.

So when she'd enrolled at Serendia Academy, a school for noble children, she'd assumed she would be able to make friends more like her.

Unfortunately, with the school's emphasis on tradition and form, they treated Lana as a classless upstart. And they, too, talked behind her back—this time about her father having bought his title.

Impolite. Unrefined. Ignorant of the tacit understandings among nobles... Every time someone said something like that about her, Lana became a little more stubborn.

The first time she'd spoken to Monica had been on a whim. Monica clearly stood out in class, and taking care of the girl had been a partial salve for her pride. Above all, despite her habit of being fidgety and downcast, whenever Lana helped her out, her face would blossom into a smile. It made Lana a little embarrassed, but it also made her happy. Each time Monica looked at her with respect, it filled her heart just a little more.

And she had expected Monica to look at her that way again at this tea party. That was precisely why Lana had done her best selecting the tea leaves. Unfortunately, however, Claudia's remark that her tea was out of place had ripped her pride to shreds.

Why did it always turn out this way?

All I wanted...was to have my friend drink the most delicious tea I could find.

She recalled a time from her youth when she'd served the best tea and snacks available to a friend she'd invited over, only for that friend to go behind her back and accuse her of flaunting her wealth.

"Hey. Sorry about that. I'm back."

As Lana scowled at the bitter memory, Casey hurried back to the table. Monica, however, was nowhere in sight. Lana gave Casey a look as if to ask where the other girl was, and Casey made a troubled expression as she sat back down. "Monica is, well, how should I put it...? At any rate, I think she'll be along

soon.”

“Didn’t you go to help her prepare her tea?” asked Lana.

“Yes, but, w-well...,” stammered Casey.

What in the world? wondered Lana. *Did something happen to Monica?*

Just as she was about to stand up herself, a pleasant scent tickled Lana’s nose—but it wasn’t the scent of tea.

“I-I’m sorry for the, um, the wait.”

Gait unsteady, Monica approached the table. In her hands was a tray holding empty cups and a strange metal pot. She set the items down on the table, then sighed and wiped the sweat off her brow. Apparently, just bringing the tray to their table had been quite a workout for the unathletic Monica.

Claudia, who’d shown no enthusiasm up to now, slowly looked up and fixed her gaze on Monica’s pot. “...That isn’t the smell of tea.”

“I-it’s coffee,” said Monica, her voice shaking as she stared directly at Claudia. “You said that starting off with a strong taste numbs your tongue... I’m the last one, so there shouldn’t be a problem with serving strong coffee.”

“...Coffee is a man’s drink. It isn’t suited for a ladies’ tea party.”

She was correct. In this country, coffee was commonplace, and there were even coffeehouses. But most of the people who drank it were men. It was quite bitter, so not everyone liked it. Lana had tried it a few times herself, but she’d found she couldn’t really appreciate it.

Monica continued with uncharacteristic firmness, however. “It’s okay. It’s really, really good...so...” She poured the coffee from the pot into the cups, then added warmed milk to just three of them.

“Y-you’re supposed to drink it as a palate cleanser after a meal, so I’d rather you drank it as is. But I know some people don’t like the bitter taste, so I added milk. You can feel free to add sugar as well.”

After she’d passed out the cups, Claudia was the first one to raise it to her lips. She sniffed it, then took a sip.

“.....”

She showed no reaction whatsoever. It was a little scary.

Lana and Casey added sugar to their cups, then nervously followed suit. Lana’s eyes went wide.

“What is this...? There’s no odd taste or sourness to it at all!” she said, taking another sip of the cup’s contents. The milk’s smoothness enveloped the sharp, bitter flavor. Lana had never had coffee like this before.

Casey seemed just as surprised as she stared hard into her cup. “Hey, I’ve never had coffee before, but...is it supposed to go down this easily?”

Lana couldn’t blame her for saying that. Coffee was obviously very bitter, but its uniquely odd flavor and acidity also contributed to how divisive it was.

Until some time ago, the main method used by coffee makers was to boil crushed beans and sugar together and extract the liquid. Lately, however, a tool called a *siphon* had been popularized, which removed a lot of the odd, unwanted flavors.

But the coffee Monica had prepared tasted even better than that.

Gazing at the silver pot, Claudia said, “...The more time it takes to extract the coffee, the harsher and less pure the flavor becomes.”

“Y-yes...,” replied Monica. “That’s why I use this pot to extract it quickly. It uses the power of water vapor to extract the coffee in a short time, so—”

“I’ve never seen a tool like that before. Not even in books,” said Claudia.

Lana’s and Casey’s eyes widened. Claudia was known for her vast knowledge—people called her the Walking Library. She must be the most widely read person here—no, in the entire academy.

And even she doesn’t know what it is! thought Lana, staring at Monica’s pot.

Claudia finished off the contents of her cup and settled her lapis lazuli stare on Monica, her expression still unreadable. “...I see. It’s good for catching someone by surprise. But this class is about *tea* parties. It’s rather absurd to serve something that isn’t tea.”

“I—I guess so... Um... Well...”

Monica looked down and picked up her own cup. Hers was the only one she hadn’t added milk to. No doubt she was used to drinking bitter coffee.

“I, well... I wanted to let my friends, um, drink my favorite thing, so... Um...” Monica wrapped her hands around her cup, lowered her eyebrows, and gave a crooked smile. “...I guess I’m the one who’s most out of place,” she finished with an awkward laugh.

Lana’s mind went blank.

What is this? What is this? What is this...?

Until just now, she’d been the one depressed about being most out of place—and then Monica had gone even further by bringing out coffee, which made no sense for a tea party and would surely lose her points.

Lana gulped down the rest of her coffee.

“...It’s delicious... I love it,” she said, holding back tears.

A smile bloomed on Monica’s face.

* * *

That night, in her attic room in the girls’ dormitory, Monica was hard at work writing a report.

She’d naturally been docked points for serving coffee at the tea party. Lana and Casey had smoothed things over with the teacher, so she hadn’t outright failed, but in exchange, she’d been told to submit a report.

Nero was next to her, holding a coffee cup in his front paws and poking his face into it.

“Hmm, hmm. This really ain’t so bad, eh? I see. So this is what they mean by a *mature flavor*.”

That he could still say that after adding so much sugar and milk was hard for Monica to believe.

Finished with the report, she returned her feather pen to its stand and sighed. She recalled the image of her tea leaves in the garbage. They’d clearly been thrown out on purpose, not by accident.

...It'd be nice if it was all just a mistake, thought Monica with a bitter expression. She hung her head. "This time, it was only tea leaves...but I wonder if it will get worse."

"Don't like it anymore?" teased Nero. "Want to tuck your tail between your legs and run back to your little mountain cabin?"

"...I'll keep trying a little bit longer," she murmured.

Nero narrowed his golden eyes, grinning. "Heh. Until just a little while ago, you'd have been bawling, whining that you couldn't do it, and begging to go home."

"Urk... Well, that's... Maybe that's true, but..."

Monica started playing with her fingers as Nero jumped onto her lap and smacked her thigh with his front paw. It was much like how a person might clap a friend on the shoulder.

"Who cares?" he said. "If you've started to grow an attachment to this place, I don't think that's a bad thing."

"Really...? Yeah, maybe you're right, Nero."

This academy held more than just bad memories for her now. It wasn't much, but she had friends. People who would help her when she was in need. For someone who had obstinately refused all social connection in the past, the experience was completely new.

...But Monica Norton, the shy, inarticulate student, was just a facade.

Once her mission ended, she'd be leaving this school and returning to her life at the mountain cabin.

After that, it was likely that nobody she met here at the academy would ever see her again—because she was Monica Everett, the Silent Witch and one of the Seven Sages.

As she mulled over that fact, Monica started getting ready for tomorrow's classes. The air blowing in from her open window was different from the autumn breeze of her mountain cabin; here, it carried the scent of the flowers in the flower bed.



CHAPTER 7

The Dream the Bitter Tea Showed

One week had passed since the day of the tea party—and Monica was at the end of her rope. As soon as lessons broke for lunch, she hurried out of the classroom. But simply being the first one out didn't mean she could let her guard down. Glancing left and right, she made her way outside.

I...I should be fine now...right? she thought, only to look up and find a black-haired girl sitting on the bench next to the flower bed.

Monica gave a soft yelp. It was Claudia.

She sat there as though she were a mere ornament, hands folded and legs together. But when she noticed Monica, she turned her head and started to stare.

She'd been doing it all week—showing up wherever Monica went and watching her from a distance.

Still, watching was all she'd been doing. Claudia never approached or tried to speak to her, but that only made it all the more creepy.

Could she have found out that I'm the Silent Witch...?

Ultimately, Monica took a detour around the school building to try and shake off her pursuer, then headed back to her classroom. By the time she reentered the school, lunch break was almost over. She'd completely missed her chance to eat.

I wish I could have a nice, quiet lunch once in a while, thought Monica, sighing and holding a hand to her empty stomach. But as she approached her classroom, she found several female students standing in her way.

"Oh, do you have a moment, Lady Monica?" asked the girl with caramel-colored hair—Caroline Simmons, the daughter of Count Norn. She was the one who had caused Monica to fall down the staircase. Wary, Monica backed away.

Caroline modulated her voice into a more soothing tone. "You don't need to

be so scared. I'd like to invite you to a tea party."

"A...a tea party?"

"Yes. Classes are ending a little early today, right? Let's all have some tea before your student council work. Also, I wanted to talk about the time you accidentally fell down the stairs."

Given how distinguished Caroline's family was, Monica couldn't refuse an invitation from her without a very good reason. *I'm a student council member... So I have to be good at ballroom dancing and tea parties*, she said to herself, gripping the council member badge affixed to her uniform.

Caroline probably intended to say mean, nasty things to her again. But Monica would have to endure it only until the tea party ended. Clenching her fists, she looked up.

The noble girl narrowed her eyes into a smile. "You'll come to my tea party, won't you?"

"A-as long as it, um, doesn't interfere with my student council duties, then..."

"Oh, of course. I didn't want to take that much of your time." With a happy grin, Caroline glanced at the other girls beside her. "Right, everyone?"

Even as the others nodded and agreed with Caroline, they kept watchful eyes on Monica. She could see blatant disdain creeping across their faces. Their eyes said it all—they thought she was a wretched, unsightly girl.

It's okay. It'll be okay. I just have to drink the tea and nod along. Just don't say anything unnecessary, and you'll be fine. Perfectly fine...

Unbeknownst to Monica, as she was desperately trying to convince herself she'd be all right, a pair of lapis lazuli eyes was staring at her.

* * *

Caroline had decided on a tea table in the courtyard for the party—the same place the tea party practices were held. Many girls apparently used the space for tea parties when the weather was nice. In fact, several other tables had already been set by the time Monica arrived, and at each one, students were whiling away their time in leisure.

With this many people around, Monica probably wouldn't suffer any physical violence or have tea splashed in her face. A tiny bit relieved, she took her seat.

Four people sat at the table, including Monica herself and Caroline, who sat directly across from her. Caroline had big, clear eyes, and despite being the same age as Monica, she seemed more mature. There was something bright and eye-catching about her.

...*Huh? Her eyes...* On this clear autumn day, beneath the afternoon sunlight, Monica suddenly felt like something was a little *off* about Caroline.

But before she could say anything, the girl gave a short chuckle. "Thank you so much for coming today, Lady Monica. I know you're busy."

"Th-thank...you for inviting me," said Monica awkwardly.

Caroline nodded benevolently. "I do apologize for that whole *unfortunate accident* that ended with you falling down the staircase... You weren't injured, were you?"

"N-no, I, um, I was fine."

"Oh, thank goodness!" said Caroline, a gorgeous smile lighting up her face. Her large eyes narrowed, and her voice lowered in pitch. "Then would you mind talking to Lord Cyril and telling him it was just an accident?"

".....Huh?" Monica was at a loss for words.

Meanwhile, the other girls supported Caroline.

"That's right—it was an accident!"

"Lady Caroline has done nothing wrong."

Apparently, that was the goal of this tea party. They wanted Monica to testify that the incident in which she'd fallen down the staircase had been accidental.

"Lady Monica Norton, it *was* an accident, yes? I never raised a hand against Lana Colette... Isn't that right?"

The other girl's wide eyes seemed to draw her in, as if to intimidate Monica into nodding in agreement. And she wanted to—to let herself fold under the pressure, lower her head, and agree. If she did, she would probably be freed

from this situation.

...But, but...!

After Monica had fallen down the stairs, Cyril had taken it upon himself to question those present. If Monica did as Caroline said and agreed that it was an accident, it would put all his efforts to waste.

Monica grasped at the front of her uniform, her lips trembling. “I...I don’t want, um, to contradict his conclusion and...cause trouble for Lord Ashley.”

She’d said it. She’d managed to get the words out.

Caroline was silent. Nervous, Monica looked at her face—and saw chillingly cold eyes staring back at her.

“...I see,” Caroline said curtly, a low, heavy anger creeping into her voice. Monica shook under the focus of Caroline’s rage. However, the caramel-haired girl soon reined herself in and plastered a friendly smile onto her face. “Oh, dear me. I was just so absorbed in the conversation. This lovely tea is going to get cold... Please have a drink.”

“A-all right...”

Once I drink this tea, I’ll leave, decided Monica, taking the cup as Caroline and the others all raised their folding fans to cover their mouths.

Oh, that’s... That’s one of the basic actions of a villainess, just like Lady Isabelle said...!

She could hear a round of tittering from behind the fans—emitted with such precision that she could only assume they’d trained for this. Neither too loud nor too soft, it had just the right balance of cruelty and derision.

I see, so this is how it looks in the wild..., thought Monica, strangely impressed, as she brought her cup of black tea to her lips.

When she took a sip, she found the liquid awfully bitter. Not astringent, as though it had been over-brewed, but bitter. *Maybe it’s just that kind of tea?* she wondered. The taste was strong, but not too strong to drink. Monica was used to drinking bitter coffee on a daily basis, so she continued to sip her tea, though she had a strange feeling about it.

Immediately, the expression on the others' faces changed.

...? What's wrong? Monica wondered.

They seemed shocked and looked at her with disgust in their eyes. Had Monica done something uncouth? To hide her anxiety, she downed the rest of the fiercely bitter tea.

"Ah—" said Caroline.

...H-huh?

Monica's heart began to pound in her ears. She saw stars in her eyes as the world around her began to blur.

"She drank it?"

"Are you serious? But it's so bitter."

"No way. I thought for sure she'd just choke on it..."

Caroline and the others spoke quickly, sounding flustered. Their voices reached Monica's ears, but she couldn't identify the sounds they were making as words. It was all just noise to her.

What...is this?

The world began to distort, seep away, blur, melt, and sink into the reddish color of the tea.

No. This red wasn't from the tea.

It was from the flames.

They swayed and flickered, crackling and sending out sparks. Beyond them, she saw a person.

"F-Father...?"

The sight of her father, bound to a tree, began to disappear into the fire. The odor was terrible. It was the stench of burning flesh.

The people surrounding her father all spoke at once.

"Heretic! Heretic! Sinner! Breaker of taboo!"

"...N-no, Father isn't... It's not his fault..."

One of them threw something into the blazing fire, causing more sparks to fly. It was all of her father's research. Everything he had written in his lifetime. All so, so important to him...

"Stop... Stop... Don't burn them... Don't burn them..."

They burned and burned, all those wonderful numbers he'd built up over the years, all those records, turned to ash in mere moments.

I have to remember, I have to... The numbers he left behind, I have to remember them...

She opened her eyes as wide as she could, though they stung from the smoke, and stared directly at the documents being hurled into the flames.

Her vision wasn't very good when it came to moving objects, so she could see only fragments. Still, she burned what numbers she could into her memory, not allowing herself to blink.

I have to memorize as many of the records he left as I can. If I don't—

Those numbers she'd engraved into her mind were her father's legacy. She'd never forget them. They were the proof that he'd lived.

"18473726, 385, 20985.726, 29405.84739—"

"Quit speaking in numbers! It's disgusting! Shut your mouth!"

Along with the insult, a liquor bottle swung down toward Monica as she recited the numbers.

Crying, all she could do was curl up on the ground and cradle her head.

"I'm sorry Uncle I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry—"

"All because of my elder brother's idiotic research, I have to suffer, too! With a criminal in the family, my business is as good as over, do you even understand that?! This is hogwash!"

"No... Father isn't... He didn't do anything wrong... He didn't..."

"You better not go around telling people that crap! I'll beat you with a fire hook!"

"I'm sorry Uncle please don't hit me don't hit me I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry—"

won't say anything to anyone I promise I'll keep quiet don't hit me don't hit me
I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry..."

* * *

The courtyard was in an uproar. Monica Norton had suddenly fallen out of her chair during a tea party and passed out. Her face was white, and she was wheezing unnaturally, scratching at her own throat and muttering nonsense in between each breath.

Caroline and the others who had been at her table all watched her as though she was an object of disgust. Nobody tried to help her.

Then another girl silently approached their table. She had black hair and a gloomy aura—Claudia. Without a word, she knelt down next to Monica and checked her condition.

"...What did you make her drink?"

Caroline shook her head and shouted shrilly, "I don't know! I don't know! I don't know anything!"

"....." Claudia quietly stood up, then slithered over to Caroline like a snake and shoved her hand into the other girl's pocket. Her fingertips found something. "...Eye drops?"

"Hey! Give that back! Don't touch my things! ...Eek?!"

Claudia wordlessly grabbed Caroline's chin as she wailed. Then she brought her free hand up to lift Caroline's makeup-covered eyelids before carefully examining her eyes. "...Dilated pupils... Belladonna, or another similar poison."

"This—this is just a medication to make my eyes larger!"

"It's poison."

Claudia swiftly cut down Caroline's excuse. Staring right into her enlarged pupils, Claudia dropped her tone and continued with emphasis. "You poisoned this girl."

"No... I...I just wanted her to choke on the bitter tea and embarrass herself... Who could have imagined anyone would drink an entire cup of something that bitter?! It's her own fault!"

Ignoring Caroline's wails, Claudia knelt down beside Monica again. She lifted the girl's upper body, then plunged a finger into her mouth. Monica spasmed, whimpering softly.

"...Uh, ugh...weh..."

"Throw it up."

Even with Claudia's finger at the back of her throat, Monica wasn't able to vomit—she just continued to moan quietly. Calmly, Claudia issued an order to those standing around her watching.

"Somebody bring a weak saline solution. Also, contact the infirmary and the student council."

* * *

Whenever Monica remembered her father, she always saw his slender back, clothed in white.

...Father? Father?

He was a scientist—the kind who sat at his desk for most of the day. Wanting him to turn toward her for even a few minutes, the young Monica would reach out for his back...before lowering her arm again.

She knew her father's work was very important. She didn't want to get in his way.

But on that day, he seemed to hear her thoughts. Suddenly, he stopped writing and turned around to face her. He had a big beard and wore small, round spectacles. Behind them, his eyes were calm and intellectual. He'd always been a peaceful person.

He took her lowered hand and wrapped it in both of his, squeezing it. His hands were big and warm.

She giggled. "Heh-heh...Daddy..." Her face broke into a smile at his hands' warmth. Then, for some reason, she heard a voice from above her.

But it wasn't her father's voice from her memories...

"Hmm. Do I really look that old?"

"Sir, there is no need to pay any mind to this girl's sleep-talking."

“This is when you’d usually suggest slapping her awake, you know.”

“I, er... W-well, she’s sick, so!”

Monica gave a soft moan and lifted her heavy eyelids.

She seemed to be on a bed in the infirmary. It was a place she’d been carried to before. Next to the bed on which she’d been sleeping were two figures. The evening light filtered in through the window and lit up their hair—vivid blond and silver.

“...The prince...and...Lord Ashley...?”

Felix was holding her hand, and Cyril was next to him, peering into her face.

What were the two of them doing in a place like this? And why was Felix holding her hand? Slowly regaining consciousness, Monica idly sorted through her memories of the events that had led her here.

...There was a tea party, and I drank some bitter tea, got dizzy, and... Everything after that was hazy. But she felt like she’d just had an awfully scary dream.

“You were poisoned,” said Felix, “by Count Norn’s daughter at a tea party. It caused you to fall into a terribly distraught state.”

“...!” Monica blanched and pulled her hand away from Felix.

Then she practically rolled off the bed and, forcing her still-weary body to move, pressed her forehead to the floor.

Completely taken aback, Cyril shouted, “What are you doing?!”

Groveling, Monica spoke with difficulty through her madly shaking lips. “...I’m...I’m so, so sorry...for...for causing you...a-all this, this trouble...” Just producing the words made her want to throw up. But she’d ruined the tea party and caused a big fuss, so she had to apologize.

“I’m on the student council...but I can’t do anything right... I’m sorry.”

Dance class had gone awfully for her, so she’d wanted to at least figure out tea parties. But instead, she’d added yet another stain to the student council’s record. Sobs crept into her apology. The back of her nose stung, and the backs

of her eyes grew hot. Her tear ducts were looser than usual, and her tears fell quickly, blotting the floor.

“Lady Norton, look at me,” said Felix, kneeling down beside her.

But Monica couldn’t bring her face up. *Everyone must be sick of me. I’m a student council member, and yet I can’t even conduct myself properly at a tea party.*

She could think of plenty more words with which to criticize herself. And she was doing just that, lining up all her failures, grinding down her own spirit, when suddenly hands dove in under her sides.

The hands lifted her like someone picking up a cat.

“Get up already! How dare you make the prince kneel!”

The one to do it had been Cyril. *And now Lord Ashley is angry with me again. All because I can’t conduct myself properly...*, thought Monica, still bawling. Cyril carefully pushed her back onto the bed.

Then, placing the blanket over her, he yelled, “You’re the *victim* here! The victim has no reason to bow and apologize!”

“B-but...”

“You look like you’re about to pass away! Keep your mouth shut! I dare you to get out of bed again without permission. I’ll tie you to it with rope!” Cyril scowled as he made this rather violent declaration.

Just then, there came another voice. “Oh, what are you making such a fuss over in the infirmary? ...*Dearest elder brother.*”

The curtain partitioning the beds swayed, and out popped the face of a beautiful girl. Just the face, like some kind of eerie floating head. The rest of her body remained hidden behind the curtain. It was Claudia.

...Elder brother? thought Monica.

Cyril stared at her in surprise. He fell silent as his lips twisted into a frown. In contrast, Felix greeted her with a sweet smile and spoke up. “Lady Claudia Ashley, thanks to your very competent first aid, a student’s life has been saved. As student council president, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Claudia's face fell into despair, as though she'd just witnessed the end of the world. "...You're welcome," she muttered bitterly.

Cyril glared at her—her behavior wasn't exactly respectful. "The prince has just given you praise. It's an *honor*. You could be a little happier about it."

"...Oh, so you want me to wag my tail as if I'm some stupid dog, just like *a certain someone*?" Claudia snorted in derision while keeping all expression from her face—an impressive feat.

Her behavior would have set just about *anyone* off, and as expected, Cyril blew his top. "Who are you calling a dog?!"

"...Nobody said I was referring to you. Oh, why are you grimacing like that? Aren't you the one who tried to carry Monica Norton here while she was out cold, then couldn't make it and had to hand her off to the president, *dearest elder brother*?"

As she spoke, she maintained an emotionless monotone. Cyril's face went red at first, but as she kept going, it paled until it was a ghostly white. It was a miserable sight to behold.

"...I...I'm s-sorry I'm so heavy..." muttered Monica, doing her best to back up Cyril.

Cyril scowled and began to wordlessly grind his teeth. It was a little scary.

Wh-what do I do? Lord Ashley is mad...all because I'm so heavy...

As she panicked, Felix leaned forward and smoothly stroked her cheek. "You're not heavy. In fact, you're surprisingly light. I think you should eat more."

He adjusted her blanket and turned to Cyril. "We shouldn't stay too long—she's sick. Let's take our leave."

Cyril nodded without complaint. Then he turned a glare on Monica and said, "No need to come to the council room today. Assume there's no work for you to do even if you did."

"B-but we're busy with preparations for the festival..." They had to draw up documents to send to the contractors, review proposed club budgets, and a

number of other things she would have liked to finish today.

But Cyril answered her firmly, “It won’t be a problem.”

When Monica tried to protest again, Felix peered into her face and smiled softly. “Go back to the dorm and get some good rest, all right?” His voice was tranquil but also firm—he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Seeing Monica swallow her next objection, he and Cyril stepped away from her bed. Claudia took a handkerchief out of her pocket and waved it after them ostentatiously. Her face was expressionless.

Cyril looked like he was about to lose it. “Claudia,” he said, “keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn’t sneak out of here and try to go to the student council room to work.”

“...Oh, if you’re so concerned, you need only say so. You did seem awfully worried peering into Monica Norton’s face as she slept. How flustered you looked, *my dearest elder brother*.”

Cyril began to shake. Felix chuckled at the siblings’ exchange, then left the infirmary with Cyril.

The room grew quiet the moment they were gone. Steeling herself, Monica turned to Claudia. “U-um, thank you for...for the first aid.”

“...How much do you remember?” she asked.

“Up until I drank the tea...” Monica didn’t recall anything after that, aside from having a nightmare. When she’d come to, she’d already been in the infirmary bed.

Claudia slipped away for a moment, then came back with a cup. It had milk in it. “Drink this,” she said. “A little at a time is fine. It’s not much, but it’ll help protect your stomach’s lining.”

Monica took the cup and put it to her lips as Claudia sat down on the chair next to her bed. “...An eye medicine used for dilating pupils was mixed in with your tea.”

“E-eye medicine? ...Was that why Lady Caroline’s pupils were so large, even though it was bright...?”

Monica had felt something was off about the girl from the moment they came face-to-face in the courtyard. Normally, in bright places, one's pupils shrink to limit the amount of light that can enter. Caroline's, however, had stayed large.

"U-um, does Lady Caroline...have an eye disease?" ventured Monica.

"...She used it as a beauty product. The idiot had a delusion that having bigger eyes makes you more beautiful, so she used it, heedless of the danger."

The eye drops Caroline had possessed were normally used for eye examinations. They didn't cause a problem as long as you used them as intended, but they were toxic and would cause hallucinations and poisoning symptoms when misused.

And she'd put some in Monica's teacup.

"...The concoction is a very bitter mixture," continued Claudia. "They probably did it to get a few laughs out of seeing you choke on it."

That was why Caroline had held the tea party in the courtyard in front of everyone instead of in her room—she'd wanted to laugh at Monica in public for making an ugly display of choking on her tea.

But what Caroline hadn't predicted was that Monica would drink down the whole cup without issue. "Ummm...", she said. "Well... It was bitter, but not undrinkable, so..."

"...What do you think creatures have taste buds for? They're not for savoring delicious food. They're there to distinguish and avoid poisons."

Scolded in a roundabout way for her poor risk management, Monica fell silent.

Maybe Claudia was right—maybe Monica should have been more cautious. Caroline had obviously been up to something. Monica shouldn't have consumed just anything the other girl offered her.

According to Claudia, Monica hadn't been able to throw up the poison on her own, so she'd fed her a weak saline solution to force it.

"...When you threw up, there was barely anything in your stomach. You seem to weigh relatively little for someone your age, and you certainly don't seem to

be taking care of yourself.”

“.....Urk.” The reason she hadn’t eaten lunch today was because she’d been running away from Claudia. Nevertheless, this wasn’t the first time she’d been told her nutritional intake was less than sufficient, so it stung. She hung her head.

Claudia continued, her voice still glum. “The smaller someone is, the less poison it takes to kill them... Even a poison that wouldn’t kill an adult with a standard body type can be fatal to someone with a child’s body. You’re lucky to be alive.”

“A ch-child’s body...,” stammered Monica, unintentionally staring at Claudia. She was slender but tall, and the parts of her body that stuck out definitely stuck out. You would never guess she and Monica were the same age.

Monica had never had much of a complex regarding her body, but after becoming friends with Lana and Casey, she’d become ever so slightly more conscious of how childish she looked. She took her defeat in silence.

Claudia leaned in and peered at her face. “...Oh? What’s wrong, Child Body? You’re staring, Child Body. Also, don’t eat any solid foods for the rest of the day. You’ll just throw them up, Child Body.”

“Y-you don’t have to keep calling me ‘Child Body’ like that...”

“...I simply want to avoid you trying to thank me for saving your life.”

Monica’s eyes widened. Come to think of it, Claudia had looked sour when Felix thanked her. Monica was naturally grateful to her, and she wanted to say thank you. But Claudia truly seemed to find the notion unpleasant—she wasn’t just trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Um... Do you not want me to thank you because...you hate me? Is...is that it?” asked Monica, voice shaky.

Claudia sat up straight. Her expression remained impassive, like a doll’s. But Monica thought she caught a dark emotion—not quite malice—flicker deep in her lapis lazuli eyes.

“...I don’t hate you exactly,” she answered listlessly. “...Though I don’t like

you, either.”

Monica rallied her courage and asked, “Th-then...why have you been... following me around all week?”

She had assumed that Claudia was suspicious of her being the Silent Witch. As she waited for an answer, Claudia wordlessly slithered closer and looked at her from point-blank range.

“...Because you’ve bewitched my fiancé,” she replied.

“...Huh? Wait... Huh?” Monica nearly dropped her cup of milk.

Claudia continued dryly. “...Being on the student council with him is one thing, but to practice dancing with him... I can’t tolerate that, can I? Even I’ve barely danced with him.”

Student council. Dance practice. The first people that sprang to Monica’s mind were Felix and Cyril. But Claudia and Cyril were siblings, which narrowed the answer down to one.

W-wait, Lady Claudia...is engaged to the prince?!

On the one hand, Claudia hadn’t discovered her identity, which was cause for relief. But who could have imagined that she was Felix’s fiancée, and mistakenly believed Monica had bewitched him?!

Monica thought hard, trying to come up with some way to untangle the misunderstanding.

Just then, a sound came from the door, and she heard two sets of footsteps on the other side of the curtain.

“Monicaaaaa! We’ve come to visit!”

“Shhh! Shhh! No yelling in the infirmary!”

The familiar, lively voices belonged to Glenn and Neil. Glenn pushed open the curtain without asking and took a long stride over to the bed. “Monica, you all right?! Whoa, your face is so pale! Oh, and I brought a gift. Is meat okay?”

“Glenn, you can’t give meat to someone right after they’ve been poisoned,” chided Neil before noticing Claudia at Monica’s bedside. He straightened up and

offered her an awkward smile. “Oh. Um, hello, Lady Claudia.”

“.....” Claudia maintained her impassive expression, but the air around her had clearly changed. Her gloomy, listless aura had disappeared entirely.

Neil looked slightly troubled by her lack of expression. “Um... Well, I... Oh, I heard from the president that it was you who performed first aid on Lady Norton.”

“.....” Claudia remained as wordless and emotionless as ever. She didn’t even offer a nod in reply.

Neil started to panic, moving his arms pointlessly and continuing. “I-impressive as ever, Lady Claudia! You’re amazing!”

“...Oh.”

Just then, Monica was certain she’d seen it. Claudia’s lips as she said that one word, they had slightly—*very* slightly—come up at the corners.

She’d been so sour about Felix praising her, but now she actually seemed to be *happy*.

Wait, thought Monica. *Could Lady Claudia’s fiancé actually be—?*

“Um, is this your friend, Monica?” asked Glenn. “Neil, do you know her, too?”

Before Neil could reply, Claudia slipped closer to Monica, practically snuggling up to her. “We are indeed friends,” said Claudia slowly. “Isn’t that right? ... *Monica dearest.*”

This was the first Monica was hearing of it. Hadn’t Claudia just said she didn’t hate her but she didn’t like her, either?

While Monica looked on in a daze, Claudia stared at her with those lapis lazuli eyes. Eventually, the pressure got to her. “Y-yes...,” she stammered, nodding awkwardly.

“See?” said Claudia, looking at Glenn and Neil. “I am Claudia Ashley, a second-year and Neil’s fiancée... *So pleased to meet you.*”

“Huh? W-wait, fiancée?! Neil’s?! You’re his fiancée?!” cried Glenn.

Neil smiled vaguely. “Well, you see, it was something our parents decided

on...”

“...Oh. Would you be happier with someone else?” asked Claudia, turning her doll-like face to Neil. The intensity of her beauty made her lack of expression strangely intimidating.

Neil’s face stiffened, and he shook his head. “Um, no, I didn’t mean it like that; it’s just that I’m a terrible fit for you, and I feel guilty about it...”

His eyes flitted to the crown of Claudia’s head. That clued Monica in to what was bothering him. Neil was short compared to other boys his age—while Claudia was tall for a girl. Side by side, she’d be taller than him.

Plus, Claudia came from a marquess’s family, while Neil was the son of a baron, so their families weren’t a good match when it came to rank.

As Monica remained speechless, Claudia quickly rose, linked her arm with Neil’s, and gave a creepy smile. “...Look, Monica. Don’t you think Neil and I are a good match? ...Don’t you?”

With the two of them lined up, their height difference became even more apparent. But Claudia’s final “Don’t you?” had been delivered with such force, Monica buckled, forgoing all thought and simply nodding. “Y-yesh...”

“See, Neil?” said Claudia. “Even our friend Monica has given us her blessing.” Her tone seemed to say, *Look, there’s no problem at all.*

Neil feigned a smile as Glenn muttered, “She’s so intimidating!”

At that very moment, the door to the infirmary burst open yet again. A girl rushed in, her ponytail swaying behind her—it was Casey.

“Monica!” she exclaimed. “I heard you were brought to the infirmary! Are you al—”

She stopped and stared at Neil and Claudia, arm in arm.

She was silent for a moment. Then she looked perplexed. “Hey, er, what’s going on here?”

“...It should be plain to see. Neil and I are about to regale you with the story of how our romance began.”

“Hold on. Sorry, I’m afraid it’s still not clear to me,” said Casey, astonished.

Monica offered her a pained grin.

* * *

Felix made his way down the hallway, his characteristic tranquil smile gone from his face. Its absence only made his clear, handsome features more conspicuous. Cyril followed meekly behind—perhaps he’d sensed the prince’s quiet irritation.

As Felix walked, he silently confronted the source of his vexation... *What a bother*, he thought. *I’ve never been one to waste my anger like this*. The rage he felt inside was reserved for when it was needed and for *whom* it was needed—it wasn’t supposed to come out on its own like this.

But when Monica had groveled on the floor to apologize, it had brought back a memory from his past.

“I’m on the student council...but I can’t do anything right... I’m sorry...”

She’d been shaking as she said it—and in his mind her image had overlapped with that of another— a young boy.

“I’m royalty...but I can’t do anything right... I’m sorry...”

A boy who had hung his head in the face of his own powerlessness, tears creeping into his eyes as he shook and waited to be scolded.

Yes, the resemblance is clear, he thought to himself.

“I cannot seem to suppress my anger over this incident,” he said with unusual coldness.

Cyril gave a start. His expression grew tense. “The daughter of Count Norn and the other two girls are waiting in the reception room for questioning. And...” He paused, looking around before whispering into Felix’s ear. “Lady Isabelle Norton, daughter of Count Kerbeck, has barged into the student council room demanding to speak with Count Norn’s daughter...”

“Lady Isabelle? Ah, the little squirrel’s younger sister, correct?”

“They’re not blood related. It appears she is Lady Norton’s niece.”

“Hmm,” said Felix, his lips forming a smile. “Good timing. In that case, have

Lady Isabelle join us.”

A cold smile appeared on his gorgeous face as he declared, “I think this tea party will be very fun indeed.”



CHAPTER 8

The Star Villainess's High-Pitched Laugh

Caroline Simmons, the daughter of Count Norn, took her seat on the reception room sofa, where she'd been ordered to wait. She fiddled with the tassel on her folding fan, irritated. Her irritation was partly due to the bitter looks she was receiving from her two friends seated next to her. *You were all for this plan, remember?!* she thought to herself.

All she'd wanted to do was put Monica Norton back in her place—the girl had been showing off recently. Her seedy looks were a far cry from what was expected of a noble young lady, and her behavior was simply disgraceful. And yet, for some reason, she'd been appointed to the student council.

And to make matters worse, she'd received dancing instruction from Felix and Cyril—the two most popular boys at the academy. During last year's school festival ball, Caroline had done her best to try and get close to them, but to no avail. They were always surrounded. Not only had she been unable to get them to dance with her, she hadn't even been able to talk to them. All she could do was watch them from a distance.

...And yet... That little girl—why?! Caroline clenched her fan hard enough to make the spokes creak. Everything was Monica Norton's fault. All Caroline had done was offer her some slightly bitter tea. But she'd made such a huge display of things and shamed Caroline in the process. What an awful, terrible girl!

Yes. She's to blame for everything. Everything!

Caroline heard a snap from her hands. She'd cracked her fan. *Oh, and now I've broken my favorite fan. I'll have to get my father to buy me a new one.* She knew he would—he'd help her. He adored her, *and* he'd donated a lot of money to the academy. She'd never be expelled over this.

There was a knock at the door. "Excuse us," came a voice as two students entered the room.

One had softly swaying blond hair and mysterious sky-blue eyes with just a

hint of green mixed in. The second prince, Felix Arc Ridill, always maintained a gentle, mild demeanor.

The other had silver hair tinged with a tiny bit of brown, like a drop of honey on winter snow. His eyes were a deep-blue color. Cyril Ashley, the son of Marquess Highown, was well known as the Icy Scion.

As the student council president and vice president, respectively, they stood at the very top of the academy's social hierarchy.

Felix took a seat across from Caroline, then folded his hands on his lap. Cyril remained standing behind him, his cold eyes glaring down at the three girls. His expression was one of clear rage, while Felix retained his usual gentle smile.

Oh, I just know the prince will understand! thought Caroline, breathing a sigh of relief. *He'll know I'm not to blame!*

Felix turned his soft smile on her. "Lady Caroline Simmons, do you have anything to say about your attempted assassination of Lady Monica Norton via poisoning?"

The words *assassination* and *via poisoning* were enough to make Caroline and her friends' faces go white. Murder was severely punished even in noble circles, and attempting such a crime warranted a suitable penalty, even if the murder didn't actually come to pass.

"You misunderstand, Your Royal Highness! It was just a little prank! Monica Norton made a big show out of it... She obviously wanted to shame me!"

"You would poison a classmate's cup as a prank?" asked Felix. His voice was as calm as ever—and yet his words were chillingly merciless.

Tears formed at the corners of Caroline's eyes as she began to plead. "That wasn't poison! It was just eye medicine! It's very bitter, and I heard it could work as a restorative... That's it! I thought it might snap her out of all that trembling..."

She'd made up that last part on the spot. The peddler who had sold her the medicine had joked that it was very bitter, but that didn't mean it made a good restorative. At the time, she'd scoffed at the absurd notion of putting eye medicine in your mouth. But she'd say anything now if it would get her out of

this.

As she wove her frantic excuses, Cyril removed a small bottle wrapped in a handkerchief from his pocket. It was the bottle of eye drops they'd confiscated from her earlier when she was brought to this room.

"According to my younger sister, Claudia, the medicine you had is manufactured for use during eye surgery. Without a doctor's license or a state-approved certification to practice medicine, you are not allowed to possess it." There was a glaring light deep in his blue eyes as he glowered at Caroline. "Not only were you in possession of an illegal, dangerous drug, you *fed* it to someone else. If you won't call that attempted murder, then what *would* you call it?"

Cyril's sister, Claudia Ashley, was a direct descendant of the Lineage of the Wise. Her vast knowledge had earned her the nickname the Walking Library and outstripped even that of adults. If she had said that, it was most likely true.

The color drained from Caroline's face, but she continued her desperate search for a way out. "Well, that's... I had no idea the eye drops were so dangerous. I was only told that they were medicine for your eyes... Ah, Prince, please believe me!" she begged, tears rolling down her face.

Felix smiled softly. "Then you claim that you knew nothing, and put the eye drops in Lady Monica Norton's cup as a simple prank."

"Yes! That's right!"

"To shame Lady Norton," added Felix quietly.

Caroline immediately bit her lip and fell silent.

The prince leaned an elbow on the armrest of his chair and placed his chin in his palm. His blue eyes narrowed. "Then it's defamation of character in addition to the rest."

"....." Caroline *knew* she'd skillfully excused herself. And yet, Felix offered no words in her defense. Why didn't he? Why wasn't he helping her? At the moment, she still earnestly believed she could escape by claiming total ignorance.

And then there came a knock at the door.

“Enter,” Felix called out.

A female student walked into the reception room and curtsayed gracefully. She was a first-year student with curled orange hair, slightly stern yet beautiful features, and a dignified presence.

“I am Isabelle Norton of House Kerbeck. Your Royal Highness, I sincerely thank you for allowing me to meet with you today.”

Monica Norton had apparently been taken in by House Kerbeck. In which case, Isabelle, Count Kerbeck’s daughter, would naturally come to ask about the situation.

...But I should be fine, thought Caroline. Count Kerbeck’s daughter has a vehement hatred for Monica. She torments her. In fact, she’d actually witnessed Isabelle scolding her on one or two occasions. She won’t criticize me too much for something that happened to Monica.

The prince gestured to a chair, and Isabelle took a seat, then lowered her eyes apologetically. “I have heard that our problem child has caused everyone a great deal of distress. As a member of House Kerbeck, allow me to extend my heartfelt apologies.”

Felix and Cyril remained silent. Caroline, on the other hand, privately cheered. *See? I knew it! Someone could outright kill Monica Norton and House Kerbeck wouldn’t bat an eyelash!* She chuckled to herself. If Isabelle hated Monica, then that would make her Caroline’s ally.

Isabelle glanced over at her and offered a cute smile. “I know it won’t do for an apology...but my maid has prepared some tea for everyone. I’m sure you’re all thirsty from talking for so long. Please have some.”

She called out through the door. Her maid quietly entered the room and placed a cup-laden tray in front of Isabelle. She didn’t immediately distribute the tea, though, which struck Caroline as strange.

Isabelle then took a small bottle out of her pocket, pinching it and lifting it up so that Caroline and the others could see it.

And when they did, all three of them cowered. It looked exactly like the bottle of eye drops Caroline had possessed.

“Oh yes, I know. Since we’re all here anyway, I wanted to have you try this out. I bought it from a peddler recently... It’s a very effective beauty product,” she said, putting drops of the liquid into three of the cups. Her maid handed those without the drops to Isabelle, Felix, and Cyril—and the rest of them to Caroline and her friends.

When Caroline grimaced at her cup, Isabelle hid her mouth with her fan and tittered. Despite being hidden, her laughter was very clearly full of scorn and malice. Eventually, she said, “...Drink up, would you?”

Caroline stared at her cup. She couldn’t smell anything in it aside from the black tea. But her eye drops had been odorless, too. *Is that bottle the same as mine? Why would the daughter of Count Kerbeck have something like that?* It would be odd for her to conveniently have the same eye drops. This had to be a coincidence.

Caroline’s friends watched from beside her, waiting to see what she did. Neither of them made a move to touch their cups.

Stop this! thought Caroline. *You’re basically admitting that the eye drops I had were poisonous!*

It couldn’t have been the same bottle. Isabelle was bluffing. Caroline glared at her tea, then made up her mind and took a sip.

The bright flavor of the tea filled her mouth and nostrils. But moments later, an intense bitterness assaulted her tongue.

Caroline choked on it, then immediately spat it all out. She continued spitting, her saliva dripping everywhere, until she was sure that not even a drop of it remained in her mouth. Afterward, she leveled a murderous glare at Isabelle.

“This is poison! This woman just tried to poison me!”

“...Oh?” Isabelle chuckled, opening the lid of the bottle and pouring it into her own cup. Then, with a cool look, she downed the whole thing and smiled. “As I said, this medicine is a kind of beauty treatment. It *is* a little bitter, though, so I’m sure it must have surprised you.”

“Wh-why, you...!”

“Hee-hee,” she giggled. “At any rate, I’m quite certain it wasn’t so bitter that you needed to make that unsightly display of spitting it everywhere... And that girl drank all the bitter tea *you* provided, didn’t she?”

“That girl” obviously referred to Monica Norton.

Isabelle heaved a melancholy sigh. “She had *such* a pitiful upbringing—our family’s shame. However, I’ll admit she *does* at least know how to behave herself as a guest, considering she tried to finish her tea, no matter how poorly it tasted. However, it seems you can’t even manage that. What a shameless thing to do in front of a prince,” she finished, tilting her fan to cover her mouth again and letting out a nasal laugh.

Caroline had tried to embarrass Monica in front of everyone—and now Isabelle had successfully embarrassed Caroline in front of Felix.

What is going on? I hate this, I hate this!

Felix maintained his silence. He did, however, watch the exchange with an almost amused expression.

Isabelle started on her second cup of tea, relishing it. “Oh, and another thing,” she said casually. “I’ve taken the liberty of informing my father of this matter. She *does* still possess the Norton family name, and you *have* attempted to poison her. I assumed you wouldn’t mind.”

Only then did Caroline’s eyes go wide as she realized the full extent of what she’d done.

Isabelle might have hated Monica, but they still shared the same last name. Caroline had essentially just picked a fight with House Kerbeck.



“It’s such a shame...,” continued Isabelle. “House Kerbeck has long maintained friendly relations with House Norn.”

House Kerbeck’s was the largest domain in the Kingdom of Ridill’s eastern region. It was too big for anyone to deride them as mere country nobles. And with all the dragons in the mountainous region, those with eastern territories, like House Kerbeck, were constantly plagued by dragonraids.

The royal capital would send the Dragon Knights if requested, but it took time for them to travel to the east, so all the eastern nobles retained their own soldiers. And House Kerbeck’s forces were far and away the largest of them.

That was why, when dragonraids occurred and the Dragon Knights couldn’t make it in time, eastern nobles often requested help from the nearby House Kerbeck. House Norn—Caroline’s family—was no exception. Every time Count Norn’s territory had been faced with a dragonraid, they’d been helped by House Kerbeck’s soldiers.

What might happen if their daughter was to repay that kindness with hostility? What if Count Kerbeck abandoned Count Norn? With its meager military might, Norn wouldn’t be able to withstand the dragonraids. At worst, the entire territory could fall.

“Oh, I, uh...,” stammered Caroline, fussing with her hair. “No, I... This isn’t... Wait. I didn’t mean to... I didn’t... I...”

Isabelle flashed her a cold look. She was a year younger than Caroline but possessed an intimidating presence the older girl lacked.

The beautiful girl who had just torn Caroline’s pride to shreds continued. “Your thoughtless actions may lead to the ruin of your homeland... But that’s just how the social world works, isn’t it? Now, I want you to go back to the dormitory...and tell all your friends about what will happen if they make an enemy of House Kerbeck!”

Then Isabelle raised her fan and gave a light, high-pitched laugh.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

* * *

After Isabelle Norton’s peerless performance, a teacher came to bring

Caroline Simmons and her two friends to another room. Cyril saw them off with an icy expression.

Nothing was official yet, but the most appropriate move would be to expel Caroline as the perpetrator and force her two friends to leave the school of their own accord.

Caroline had never admitted fault, even at the very end. In fact, she'd tried to lay the blame at Monica's feet in an attempt to evade punishment. She'd done the same thing when Monica had fallen down the stairs.

...How foolish, thought Cyril.

He'd observed the same thing with the former accountant, who also had to leave school—nobody seemed to realize that this academy was very much a part of the social world. They assumed their parents could just pay more money and make the problem go away.

How easy it would be if trust could be bought with money... Shallow fools.

Once Caroline had left the room, Isabelle straightened up and bowed to Felix and Cyril. "I'm sorry you had to see that, gentlemen."

Isabelle's demeanor was so changed, it was hard to believe she had been roaring with imperious laughter mere moments before. *Girls are terrifying,* thought Cyril.

But Felix responded with a tranquil smile. "It was quite enjoyable, actually. Do you think your father would truly abandon Count Norn?"

Isabelle shook her head. "No. I am certain he'd never abandon another territory for emotional reasons. It would bring harm to the kingdom as a whole."

A crucial shipping route ran through Count Norn's domain. If it was blocked by dragonraids, that could prove a serious issue. Still, Count Kerbeck was a tough customer. He'd probably use this incident to his favor in future negotiations with Count Norn.

Count Kerbeck was the most influential noble in the east, a region that not only bordered several other nations, including the Empire, but often fell victim

to dragonraids. When trouble struck, the east would be on the front lines. Thus, the region's military might was at least equal to the capital's.

A rebellion from the east, then, would be the most difficult to deal with. Central nobles, fearing this possibility, wanted to decrease the eastern forces. However, the eastern nobles were resistant to any changes, constantly under threat as they were from both dragons and neighboring countries.

I've heard Count Kerbeck is a neutral party to the succession, backing neither the first nor the second prince... Cyril watched Isabelle closely.

Felix continued conversationally. "Oh yes. Speaking of Kerbeck, I heard about the Black Dragon of Worgan."

"Yes, and we're grateful to the capital for dispatching the Dragon Knights," said Isabelle. "Truly, we must thank His Majesty for his swiftness and generosity in responding to the situation."

Though Isabelle maintained a proper attitude, Felix took on a more jocular tone. "It seems your forces were enough even without the Dragon Knights, though, weren't they?"

The count's troops were accustomed to slaying dragons, so they often dealt with the problem before the Dragon Knights arrived. Felix was implying in a roundabout way that perhaps they hadn't needed to dispatch them at all.

Isabelle, though, exclaimed, "Oh, not at all! House Kerbeck has certainly been fighting dragons for centuries, but we only confronted a black dragon on one other occasion, two millennia ago. We were only able to slay the Black Dragon of Worgan thanks to the assistance of the Dragon Knights and the Silent Witch."

The Silent Witch—one of the Seven Sages. Cyril had heard of the genius young mage appointed to their ranks two years ago at the age of fifteen. He'd never seen the Silent Witch, but apparently she always wore a robe with a hood pulled low over her eyes, even during ceremonies, so nobody had ever seen her face.

A mage who hides her face...

Cyril's hand unconsciously crept up to his broach. Something was stirring within him. He heard Isabelle go on, unable to contain her excitement.

“I saw her with my own eyes!” she said. “Just as she shot down an entire horde of pterodragons in an instant!”

Cyril’s heart began to pound.

...She shot down a horde of pterodragons in an instant? he thought. *But that’s impossible.*

Dragons were weak to the cold, but their bodies were very sturdy and resistant to mana, so most magecraft didn’t affect them. To slay one, you had to aim right between the eyes. But hitting a moving target on its forehead or between the eyes was an incredibly difficult feat, even for high mages.

And yet...

The events of that night a few weeks ago flashed through his mind.

He remembered the terrifyingly high-level magecraft that had shot down all his ice arrows in an instant. It had been so well-timed that chanting would have never worked. And yet, the person had waited for Cyril to fire before using their own precise spell.

Like a silent monster.

Could the same person have also managed to shoot down all those pterodragons at once, in the same way?

Cyril quieted the turmoil in his heart, trying his best to listen to Isabelle’s impassioned story about the Silent Witch.

* * *

After leaving the reception room, Isabelle took her maid, Agatha, and headed down the hallway. The students nearby threw glances at her—most of them filled with dread. Caroline must have already spread the word about her punishment.

“Are you certain about this, madam?” asked Agatha.

“I am, and I was quite prepared for it,” replied Isabelle.

Trampling on someone naturally created enemies. Isabelle had retaliated anyway. If she made sure everyone knew not to mess with House Kerbeck, nobody would interfere with Monica anymore.

The Silent Witch Monica Everett had saved the lives of everyone living in Kerbeck. When the black dragon had first been spotted in their territory, the people of Kerbeck had, to a man, cried out in despair.

Dragons brought calamity—and the most fearsome of them all was the black dragon. A black dragon's scales repelled all magecraft, and it breathed the flames of the underworld itself, capable of incinerating all known defensive barriers. There was even a legend about how a past encounter had brought the entire kingdom to ruin.

But where the people had despaired, the Silent Witch had boldly strode into the Worgan Mountains, into the dragon's nest, all alone. And she'd successfully defeated it. If that wasn't a miracle, then what was?

For House Kerbeck, the Silent Witch was their savior. And yet, the mage herself had declined their offer of a warm welcome and left their lands.

So when the Barrier Mage Louis Miller had asked them to come to her aide, Isabelle had made up her mind. She would use every means at her disposal to repay the Silent Witch for what she'd done for them.

Upon returning to her private quarters and closing the door, Isabelle took a long look around the spacious room, putting a finger to her cheek in thought. "Agatha, we could fit a second bed in here, couldn't we?"

"Yes—we could indeed," replied the sharp-witted Agatha, immediately realizing what her charge was after.

Isabelle gave a proud snort and clenched her fist. "Then prepare one at once. My sister will need to take a break from her classes to convalesce. But I cannot take care of her in that attic room. Have her brought here, but don't let any of the other students know."

"I'll make the arrangements right away, madam."

"Thank you." Isabelle chuckled. "Being in the same room as the elder sister I so adore... Ah, this must have wounded her in both body and mind. I shall have to comfort her! I wonder if she enjoys romance novels. I'd like to lend her one of my favorite series. And then we could speak at length about the books. Oh, how wonderful... Oh, and nightclothes! Prepare them as well, Agatha! Ones that

match mine—cute ones!”

Isabelle’s eyes glittered as she made her requests, and Agatha, the ever-talented maid, nodded firmly. “Please leave it to me.”

* * *

After discussing Caroline’s treatment with the faculty, Felix headed straight to the infirmary. He wanted to check on Monica. But she wasn’t there—apparently, she’d returned to her own dormitory. He had been concerned whether she’d be able to manage the trip in her condition, but Claudia had been with her, after all, and she wouldn’t have let the girl do anything reckless.

Now that I think about it, I heard she lives in a room in the girls’ dormitory attic. Apparently, the daughter of Count Kerbeck had arranged for it. I would have liked to warn her not to torment the girl too much.

If Felix asked Isabelle the reason she bullied Monica, however, others would see it as a member of the royal family meddling with House Kerbeck’s internal affairs. Their family was very influential—and neutral. Even the second prince couldn’t easily interfere with them.

Either way, if Monica came crying to him about how Isabelle was torturing her, he could just spoil her the exact same amount. Having an obvious bully would make the little squirrel easier to tame.

Before, I’d hoped Cyril would fulfill that role...but he’s been soft on her lately.

Cyril had been the first one to pick up Monica when she’d needed to be carried to the infirmary—even though he’d run out of strength partway through. It was possible he had begun to see Monica as a little sister. Everyone knew what his relationship with Claudia was like, after all.

Felix chuckled to himself, recalling the two mismatched siblings’ amusing back-and-forth. As he did so, he caught sight of a familiar face. It was Elliott Howard, standing against the wall of the hallway with his arms folded across his chest. He was scrutinizing the prince.

“Hey, Elliott,” said Felix. “Was the Abbott Company matter resolved?”

Elliott stepped away from the wall and nodded. “Yes, and I’ve told those processing visitors to the campus to tighten up security.”

The thieves pretending to be from the Abbott Company had falsified the necessary documents of permission to get into the academy. That was how they'd waltzed right in from the front gate.

Elliott had insinuated to the *real* Abbott Company that those documents might well have been leaked on their end, which had very quickly won their agreement to all demands. As one of the few companies that dealt in fireworks and theater explosives, they were basically irreplaceable, so Felix was happy to have their cooperation.

"Criminal organizations have been using more and more advanced forging methods lately," said Felix. "No harm in making the procedure stricter."

"True," agreed Elliott, the corners of his mouth rising into a mean-spirited grin. "Of course, no matter how much documentation or how many carts they get ahold of, and no matter how much they try to make themselves appear legitimate, none of it matters if the ones playing the part are buffoons."

"Could you submit the rest in a report later? I'd like to head back to my room," said Felix, starting to walk past Elliott.

"Hey," the other boy called out, stopping him. Felix turned around; Elliott paused a moment before continuing. "...I heard Lady Norton made a show of herself at a tea party."

"She's the victim. The blame lies with Count Norn's daughter. Or were you going to tell me that a commoner like her should have known her place and never participated in a tea party to begin with?"

Seeming surprised, Elliott snorted and shook his head. "Poisoning a guest's tea and scorning them are shameful acts that ill befit a noble. I'm not about to defend the perpetrator." He shrugged dismissively, but his tone seemed indecisive as he continued. "Although... There *will* be more who try to do similar things to Lady Norton. She *is* a commoner who was chosen for the student council, after all."

Elliott pretended to be a thoughtless person, but deep down, he was the truest noble Felix knew. He would certainly never look down on the common people. He just had difficulty tolerating anyone who wasn't fulfilling their normal role—whether they were a noble or not. Felix knew Elliott was probably

the angriest of them all over the former accountant's misdeeds.

"Elliott," said Felix, "you said something before. Everyone has their roles assigned to them at birth—that nobles should act like nobles and commoners like commoners."

"Yeah, I did. And that's why I want to ask you this." Elliott narrowed his eyes and sharpened his gaze. "Why *did* you make Monica Norton the accountant?"

"Because I don't know *what* her stature is. And I think you've been feeling the same way, if perhaps unconsciously."

Elliott frowned and fell silent.

With his usual calm smile, Felix continued. "She is far too extraordinary to be a common person. Assigning her the accountant role may yet reveal her true measure."

The prince's reasoning appeared logical, but Elliott didn't seem convinced. His face, which normally sported a flippant grin, twisted into a hateful, sour expression. In a low voice, he said, "I'll admit that Monica Norton isn't ordinary. But that doesn't change the fact that she doesn't know her place." He sniffed and put on a sardonic smile. "Do you know what I hate even more than those who don't know their place? Those who don't fulfill their own roles. That goes for everyone—royalty and commoners alike."

His attitude could have been taken as disrespect, since Felix was a royal, but the prince wasn't offended by it. Calmly, he answered, "You have my word that as long as I call myself Felix Arc Ridill, I will fulfill my role." Then, much more quietly, a distant look in his eyes, he said to himself, "As long as I call myself that anyway," before passing by Elliott.

This time, Elliott didn't try to stop him.

Once he'd returned to his quarters and closed the door, a white lizard crawled out of Felix's breast pocket. It slithered down his body until it reached the floor. Once there, its form blurred, transforming into that of a servant with combed-back hair—white with hints of blue.

The spirit Wildianu, having taken on the form of a human, lowered his gaze and bowed. "I, well... You've been through quite a lot today, Master," he

ventured, trying to be considerate.

Felix nodded happily. “Yes, but I’m in a rather good mood now. I got to hear about her again, after all. It’s been such a long time.”

“Her...sir?” asked Wildianu, perplexed.

Felix grinned. Just saying her name made his voice leap, unable to contain his joy. “The Silent Witch—Lady Everett.”

In the reception room, Isabelle Norton had spoken of her with utmost excitement.

“I saw her with my own eyes! Just as she shot down an entire horde of pterodragons in an instant!”

Felix had simply nodded and let her continue, but inside, he was thinking, *Yes, I witnessed it myself...*

Felix had undercover business in the eastern territories at the time. But the east was in chaos because of the black dragon, and the crowds of people evacuating their villages and towns had slowed him down.

He’d blended in with them to avoid anyone realizing who he was, and in a stroke of misfortune, he’d run right into the horde of pterodragons.

And that was when he’d seen it.

The pterodragons blotted out the sky. Their shrill, ear-piercing cries were hostile, making plain their fury. If one was to impulsively glide down, a simple scrape from its talons would be enough to fell thick-trunked trees.

The horde itself was like a natural disaster with a mind of its own. And these were large pterodragons—each of them bigger than a civilian house. The sight of them swarming in the air in such a huge group was nightmarish.

But a moment later, a gate opened up in the sky—the grand spell to summon Sheffield, King of the Wind Spirits. Wind rushed down from the gate’s open maw, glittering white, turning into spears and piercing each of the pterodragons between the eyes.

The pterodragon cadavers plummeted toward the earth, but the shining white winds engulfed them, slowing them, sending them fluttering into a pile

on the ground like snowflakes.

Ah... Such a quiet, beautiful spell.

Felix had seen the Silent Witch several times before at ceremonies. But she'd always kept the hood of her robe low over her eyes, so he'd never gotten a look at her face. What's more, she almost never appeared in public, hence her reputation as a particularly plain, inconspicuous member of the Seven Sages.

And yet, she is able to use such incredible magecraft!

His thoughts racing with the memories of what he had seen in Count Kerbeck's dominion, Felix hummed a tune and took a key from his pocket. He used it to open a drawer, from which he removed a stack of essays.

Seeing this, Wildianu slowly blinked. "Are those essays written by the Silent Witch during her student days?"

"Yes," replied Felix. "I asked a used bookshop I frequent to acquire them. This essay details the positional coordinates and their changes for extremely advanced magecraft..." He paused, then frowned, seeming a little disappointed. "But I suppose spirits like you don't need to know anything about magecraft, do you?"

"No, sir. We can use mana intuitively, so magic formulae are beyond our understanding."

Spirits could use mana as naturally as people could reach out and pick something up off a desk. Humans weren't as innately talented, which was why they used spells—processes by which they wove magical formulae.

Felix ran his fingers lovingly over the essay's cover. "Lady Everett has yet to reveal the underlying principles behind her uncharmed magecraft, but there's no doubt she is possessed of a brilliant mind. Although she wrote this essay while she was a student, once publicized, it completely changed the common understanding of wide-area spells. She single-handedly increased the accuracy and precision of magecraft by several orders of magnitude."

"...When spirits such as myself target something with attack magic, we just aim and expel our mana without much thought."

“Humans can’t ‘just’ use mana. Only by understanding its workings and putting together a logical formula can people employ it in the form of magecraft.”

Consider, for example, when one uses a fire spell to attack an enemy. A mage first has to determine the fire’s temperature, size, shape, and duration. To then shoot it at an enemy, they would also have to integrate velocity, angle, and flight distance into their calculations, making slight adjustments to account for weather and wind direction. Without working all those precise details into the magic formula, the mage wouldn’t be able to cast the spell properly. And if it went really wrong, the fireball could end up tragically exploding in their face.

“Magecraft requires incredible amounts of calculation. Humans chant for much the same reason complex equations require intermediate equations to solve. Once you’re used to it, you can abbreviate it to a degree, but you could never look at a complex equation and immediately know the answer, right? ... But there is one human who *can* do that.”

A genius mage who could arrive at the optimal solution to a complex magical formula in an instant and thus didn’t need to chant—the Silent Witch.

When he recalled her robed figure from the ceremonies, Felix’s cheeks colored, and he broke into a smile. “I’d like to see it again, if possible—that perfectly calm, beautiful magecraft.”

He closed his eyes, replaying in his mind’s eye the scene of the giant magic circle splitting through the clouds, the gate opening in the heavens, and the shining white spears of wind. Those spears had plunged into the pterodragons’ foreheads, sending them hurtling toward the ground, killing them instantly, barely shedding any of their blood.

It was so merciless, so cruel, and so beautiful. And it had stolen Felix’s heart.

Felix gazed at the Silent Witch’s essay and breathed a sweet sigh. “Ahhh. When she shot down those pterodragons, how did she calculate their coordinate axes? Even current tracking formulae wouldn’t be able to aim at a target as small as their foreheads... I wouldn’t be surprised if the Silent Witch had developed a new tracking formula, but since the magic circles appeared directly above the dragons’ foreheads, I don’t think she used one at all. Which

would mean she accurately determined the positions of twenty-four pterodragons and instantly triggered her spell, summoning a Spirit King and piercing their foreheads. But having a complete grasp of twenty-four targets' positions and attacking them all simultaneously with a spell that powerful is simply absurd. Perhaps the Silent Witch has amazingly acute spatial senses—"

As Felix prattled on, forgetting to breathe, a troubled Wildianu finally interrupted him. "Excuse me, Master... Your tea is ready..."

"Oh yes, right. Thank you. Just leave it there, please."

Wildianu set the teacup down in accordance with his master's ambiguous instruction. Then, ever the serious sort, he added. "...My sincerest apologies, Master. My insufficient studies have left me unable to understand your words."

"No, I'm the one who should apologize," said Felix. "There's nobody else I can talk to about this, so I tend to get a little excited."

He flipped through the essay's pages, scanning them. It was an extremely advanced, complex thesis, but he'd read through it so many times that he even knew where the smallest folds in the papers were. A simple skim over the words was enough to bring it all back to mind. He'd read it enough times that he'd practically memorized the whole thing. Over, and over, and over again.

"Though I feel as if I could get along well with Lady Isabelle, as a fellow fan of the Silent Witch..." The prince was outright calling himself a fan.

At this, Wildianu's face grew troubled. "Master, you shouldn't speak of magecraft with anyone else..."

"Yes, of course. I'm well aware. Publicly, I need to appear ignorant of it." Felix smiled, looking slightly lonely as he pressed the essay in his hands to his chest. It was as though he were clutching a letter from his beloved—sadness dwelling in his narrowed eyes.



CHAPTER 9

The Circumstances of Chocolate

After being poisoned by Caroline Simmons and sent to the infirmary, Monica took about a week off from classes and spent the time recuperating in Isabelle's room. She would have gladly stayed in her attic dorm, but Isabelle had already brought in a bed for her, so she hadn't been able to refuse.

The bed was soft and fluffy, and Monica was sitting on it now, wearing a borrowed set of silken nightclothes. She turned the page in the novel Isabelle had lent her, feeling uncomfortable under the girl's excited gaze. Upon finishing that last page, Monica rubbed her tired eyes.

Isabelle, sitting at her bedside, leaned forward a little and asked excitedly, "How did you like it? That was Maroné Firill's most famous work—*The White Rose Maiden Sleeps in the Flower Garden!*"

"U-um..." Monica wasn't sure how to reply, and her gaze wandered. "Th-the choice of words...is very, um, unique."

"It is, isn't it? Maroné Firill's phrasing is so poetic and beautiful, and she does an especially wonderful job of depicting scenery and the heroine's mindset! But her narratives are amazing, too! One simply cannot help but cry as the characters part ways in chapter three!"

Monica, who had read all the way through chapter three without crying, began to feel as if she owed Isabelle an apology. She'd never read many storybooks, even when she was very young, so she had a hard time with the peculiar turns of phrase unique to this sort of fiction. It had described soft skin as smooth as white porcelain, black hair like melted ebony sprinkled with dusted gemstones, and youthful lips the color of wild strawberries. Monica wondered why the author didn't simply say a character had white skin, black hair, or red lips.

But since she was hesitant to speak ill of something Isabelle had recommended to her, she just smiled vaguely and nodded.

Then Isabelle's maid, Agatha, called out softly, "Madam, it is almost time for your meal."

"Oh, it's already that late?" said Isabelle. "I must go to the cafeteria for a short time, my sister. Agatha will prepare your food."

"...Th-thank you."

After Isabelle left the room, her young maid, Agatha, brought over a tray with some food on it. "I'll leave everything here," she said. "When you're finished, please ring the bell on the table."

"...U-um, th-thank you."

Agatha smiled sweetly at her, bowed, and left the room. She seemed to have guessed that Monica wasn't used to eating around others, and Monica was grateful for her consideration.

She climbed out of bed and took a seat in a chair. Several things were on the table—soft bread, cheese, a stew containing fish and vegetables, and a dish of boiled sweet apples. Apparently, Agatha had used the cafeteria to prepare all of this specifically for Monica.

Appreciative of both Isabelle's and Agatha's thoughtfulness, Monica tore off a piece of bread and put it in her mouth. It was soft, fluffy, and just a little bit sweet. She'd almost never eaten bread this soft up in the mountains. Hers was always blackened and hard as stone. However, even that wasn't half-bad when soaked in soup and eaten with cheese.

As she was chewing on the bread and reminiscing about cabin life, she heard a scratching noise at the window. She looked over to see Nero outside, scraping his claws against the pane.

Monica got up and opened the window, and Nero slipped in and sniffed around. "Now, *that* smells good," he said.

"There's fish," she noted. "Do you want any?"

"Eh, not a huge fan of fish. Meat's more my thing. Bird meat in particular!" The cat jumped up on the table, but when he saw there was no meat, he scrunched up his face and complained, "Fine, I'll compromise and have the

cheese instead.”

Monica set the small plate of cheese in front of Nero, who proceeded to deftly use both paws to pick it up and munch on it.

“Woo, this is good stuff,” he said. “Would’ve been perfect with some meat. Maybe I should go for a little hunting session tonight.”

“...And who was it who once got a bird bone stuck in his throat and made all that fuss?”

“Ah, I was young and thoughtless back then. But all intelligent creatures must fail in order to grow.” Nero nodded to himself, perfectly satisfied with his own explanation. Then, when he noticed the novel by her bedside, his golden eyes went wide. “Don’t see that every day. Were you reading a *novel*...? Oh wait, I get it. That orange twisty girl recommended it, didn’t she?”

The nickname *orange twisty girl* was probably in reference to Isabelle’s hair. As a rule, Nero never made any effort to remember the names of humans.

“Nero,” chided Monica. “That’s rude to Lady Isabelle.”

Her familiar ignored her, continuing to munch on the cheese and stare at the cover of the novel. “Never heard of the author. Good book?”

“...I didn’t really understand it.”

“What kind of story was it?”

Monica tore off another piece of bread and thought back on the story she’d just finished reading. “...Well, there was a man and a woman,” she began.

“Uh-huh.”

“...And a bunch of things happened.”

“Right, right.”

“...And then they got married.”

“And after that?”

“...That’s it.”

Nero swallowed the cheese in his mouth and gave Monica a hard stare. “It’s

obvious this novel didn't stir your emotions in the slightest. That whole 'and a bunch of things happened' is the most important part! I can't believe you'd just trim thousands of words from the story like that."

"I'm serious! I really didn't understand much of it..."

In the story, a heroine who had fallen on hard times met a young man who turned out to be a prominent nobleman, and she fell in love with him at first sight. But the young man had a fiancée, and that fiancée came up with all sorts of schemes to get rid of the heroine. Ultimately, however, the lovers triumphed and were wed.

What Monica couldn't understand was why the heroine had fallen in love with the nobleman. To begin with, he already had a fiancée. Wasn't it normal for the fiancée to be enraged?

Monica looked silently down at the book's cover. "...How can someone be so obsessed with another person?"

The characters in the story had loved each other so much that they couldn't think about anything else. The heroine had said things like, "I want him to love me, I want to be loved, I want him to choose me, I want him to desire me...no matter what I have to give up in exchange."

The heroine's attitude reminded Monica of the culprit in the flowerpot incident she had been roped into shortly after her transfer—Selma Karsh. She had lost her mind over her fiancé and tried to harm Felix. Selma wanted her fiancé to love her. She probably would have done anything to make her wish come true. Clearly, that included causing harm to another person.

Seeing her obsessed with love like that had been terrifying to Monica.

"How can...how can she hope for so much from another person?" she wondered aloud, directing a dark-eyed gaze at the book's cover.

Nero swished his tail from side to side. "You're probably too young to understand. Love is, well... When you fall in love, it makes your chest feel tight. You know, your heart clenches up and stuff," he explained, his expression making it clear he thought he knew everything.

Monica frowned and stared at him. "You understand love, then?"

“Course I do! And by the way, I go for the females with good-lookin’ tails.”

“...Tails.”

“I just can’t get it going unless she’s got a nice tail on her, y’know? Which means you’re out of the picture, incidentally, so no need to worry about that.”

That was a world the tail-less Monica would never understand.

Just like how she didn’t have a tail, maybe Monica lacked a sense for romance, too, and always had. Satisfied with that conclusion, she put another piece of bread in her mouth. Her problem was much more basic than all this love and romance stuff anyway. A timid girl like Monica could never hope for anything from anyone.

The only thing worth being obsessed over was numbers—they would never betray her.

* * *

After a week of recuperation, Monica had made a full recovery, and she decided to return to her own room that night. Isabelle insisted she wouldn’t mind if Monica stayed, but since she was supposed to be publicly bullying the other girl, they couldn’t afford to remain in the same room forever.

Wrapping Nero in a cloth to hide him, Monica headed to the storage room on the top floor. Her quarters in the attic were on the other side of a ceiling door at the top of a ladder. She let Nero down first, since she couldn’t climb with him in her arms.

When she did, Nero looked up at her. “Hey,” he said. “Is it just me, or are we forgetting something?”

“Huh? Forgetting something?” Come to think of it, Monica *did* feel like they’d forgotten about something. She made a low, thoughtful noise as she climbed the ladder and pushed against the door in the ceiling. “What could it be...? I don’t think I left anything in Lady Isabelle’s room, so...”

“Good evening, madam. I am the messenger you forgot about.”

When Monica pushed the door open, a beautiful maid peered down at her—it was Ryn. “Eeeep?!” yelped Monica in surprise. Shocked, she let go of the ladder and tumbled backward...but instead of falling, she was caught by a gentle wind.

Ryn had manipulated the air to catch her.

The maid lightly waved a hand, causing Monica and Nero to slowly float up and into the attic room.

Sweating bullets, Monica looked toward Ryn. “I-I’m sorry... Um... Miss Ryn, how long have you...um...?”

“For approximately three days.”

Monica paled and started bowing to her. “I-I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I’ve been in Lady Isabelle’s room this past week... Um, someone tried to poison me, and I was recuperating...,” she explained, fiddling with her fingers.

Ryn’s head tilted in confusion—to about ninety degrees, in fact. She’d probably meant it to look natural, but it was extremely creepy, like a doll with a broken neck. “Why would the Silent Witch, tasked with guarding the second prince, have almost been poisoned to death?”

“...Why indeed...” Monica wanted to know the answer to that question herself.

Looking back, it’d been a month and a half since she transferred in, and she’d had a whirlwind of a time—someone had dropped a flowerpot on her, she’d caught a mage in the act of using forbidden magecraft, she’d secretly slain a dragon, she’d tried to neutralize a pair of intruders and ended up sending a horse cart out of control, and she’d almost been poisoned and killed by a classmate. The city was a scary place.

“Um, well, I’m sorry!” repeated Monica. “I’ll write a report immediately... Please just give me a moment.”

Flustered, she sat down in her chair and started writing the report. Then, as though she’d just remembered something, Ryn pounded a fist into her palm. She rummaged around in the pockets of her maid’s outfit. “While you were out, several secret documents arrived.”

“S-secret documents?”

“Yes. They were stuck under the door, so I took the liberty of gathering them. Here you are.” Ryn held out a few sheets of plain paper that had been folded in

half.

Monica felt her body tense. During her time at Minerva's, other students had stuffed awful letters with terrible things on them into her room. Grimacing at the bitter memory, she opened up one of the letters.

But what she found weren't hostile words. Far from it—the messages, written with slightly rounded letters, were just about changes in the next day's schedule or notifications about things she'd need to bring into class.

They also featured a few short comments. *"You'd better get well soon,"* said one. *"Are you eating properly?"* said another.

There was no name on them, but Monica recognized the handwriting. *These are from Lana...*, she thought. Judging by the number of letters, she'd delivered one every single day this week.

Monica felt a ticklish sensation in her lips. She brought her hands up to flushed cheeks.

"...Eh-heh." She giggled.

After reading over each and every one of the letters with care, she opened her locked drawer. The only thing inside the drawer—where she stored things important to her—was the coffeepot that was a memento from her father.

Monica put Lana's letters inside, closed the drawer, and locked it again.

* * *

The next day, when she showed up at the student council room for the first time in a week, everyone was already present. It had been a long time since she'd seen Elliott in particular, as he'd been running all over the place cleaning up after the Abbott Company imposter incident.

Monica bowed and apologized for causing an inconvenience.

Felix gave her a considerate look. "Hello, Lady Norton. Are you feeling better?"

"Y-yes, sir..."

"I'm glad to hear it. We'll be a bit busier, as more supplies for the school festival will be arriving this week, but I don't want you to push yourself."

When she heard the word *supplies*, Monica's face tensed. The imposter incident was still fresh in her mind. *If something like that happens again...*, she thought.

Elliott noticed her grim expression and shrugged. "Well, we tightened up the procedure for checking each contractor's documentation and seals, and we've forbidden possession of blades of any sort, so I doubt we'll have many issues."

"But we can't let our guard down," added Cyril, glaring at him. His tone was serious, in contrast to Elliott's.

The secretary scowled. "I know that."

Felix interrupted to try and settle things down. "Let's get started on today's work, shall we? Lady Norton, Cyril took care of your work while you were away, so you can simply focus on taking back over."

"Y-yes, sir!" Monica nodded, glancing at Cyril out of the corner of her eye. The last time she'd seen him was in the infirmary after she'd swallowed the poison and collapsed. He'd yelled something crazy about tying her to the bed if she tried to get up.

His face was just as strict as always. When he noticed Monica's furtive glances, he crossed his arms and huffed. "I'll be putting you through the wringer to make up for your absence. You'd better be prepared."

"...Right."

I have to make up for all the trouble I caused, she thought, determined to do her best. However, all her work from the previous week had been neatly finished up. Felix was right—Cyril had already done most of it for her.

He'd threatened to put her through the wringer, but all she ended up doing was checking over the documents he'd finished in her stead. As a result, Monica could now focus on her budgeting task for the school festival.

But even there, Cyril had already gone through the documents submitted by the club presidents and handed back those with problems. He'd been so considerate about everything that Monica found herself wondering if Cyril even knew what a "wringer" was.

Eventually, once the other council members had reached a stopping point, Cyril told Felix, “Sir, Accountant Norton and I have more work to do, so we’ll be staying late. I’ll be sure to lock up.”

“Oh?” said Felix. “I trust you, but...don’t overdo it, all right?”

“Yes, sir.” Cyril nodded as the other members left the room. Only he and Monica remained.

...What work could he mean? wondered Monica. She couldn’t think of anything that urgent. *Maybe he’s keeping me here to lecture me... I did cause a lot of trouble for him with that tea party...*

She imagined him shouting at her, about how she couldn’t even manage a tea party despite being a member of the student council. As she pictured the scene, she started fidgeting with her fingers in her lap.

She was sitting, still flustered, when Cyril approached, carrying something in each hand. They were cups—not fancy ones like those used in tea parties but thicker, plain white ones. He set one of them in front of Monica, then took one for himself and sat down across from her.

“Drink,” he said.

Monica looked at her cup. It was filled with a brown liquid. The hue was lighter than coffee, and it smelled faintly sweet. She’d encountered this scent just once before. “Is this...chocolate?”

“Yes.”

Chocolate was a popular luxury item among nobles. This drink was made by crushing up beans called *cocoa* and adding sugar and milk. It had a very unique taste and was more expensive than coffee.

She’d tasted it only once before in her life, but it had been a lot thicker and muddier than this. Nervously, she raised the cup, noticing how the liquid swayed. It looked much smoother than the stuff Monica had drunk before.

Cyril casually took a swig of his drink. Monica followed suit, putting the cup to her lips.

“.....!” Her eyes widened in astonishment.

It had a smooth taste and a soft sweetness—completely different from before. It wasn't thick at all, and even the acidity of the cocoa had been reduced.

Chocolate took more time to make than coffee. While you could preserve coffee beans for a while in their crushed state, the same wouldn't work with cocoa beans due to their fat content. You had to crush the beans into a fine powder right before drinking. Given the effort required, chocolate hadn't yet reached the popularity of coffee.

But *this* chocolate had none of that thick, fatty texture.

"There's...not much fat content in this, is there?"

"That's right. I used a powdered form that already had the fat removed. It was made using cutting-edge technology."

If someone had truly managed to preserve cocoa beans in powdered form, it would be a revolutionary invention. Not only would it keep better, but it'd also be quicker to dissolve in water or milk, making it much easier to drink.

As Monica sat there, quietly impressed, Cyril looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "I heard from Claudia that you drank the entire cup of poison, despite the taste."

"...I, um, yes..., " said Monica, cringing at the memory.

Cyril sharpened his tone. "Your problem is that you only eat scraps. Such things happen because you have no sense of taste. You need to cultivate your tongue. We can't have you bothering the prince like that again."

"Y-you're right... I'm sorry..."

"In other words, drinking this is for the prince's benefit. Understand?"

"Y-yes, sir!" Monica nodded her head.

Cyril nodded as well. "As long as we understand each other," he said, drinking some more. "The prince thinks highly of your abilities... That means you may run into more people like Count Norn's daughter—people who envy you and who will cause problems."

He was right. Monica was supposed to be the one protecting Felix, but Felix

had been helping her instead.

“You need to at least learn how to defend yourself. That way, you won’t make more work for him.”

“...Okay.”

Monica hung her head as she thought. She wondered if anyone had ever been envious of Cyril. *There must have been*, she thought. He served as the second prince’s aide, an enviable position. Surely there had been a few.

And now Monica was in the same boat.

“Um, Lord Ashley,” she said. “Th-thank you. About before, too, and, um, for the chocolate...”

Cyril gave one of his usual irritated sniffs and muttered, “Savor the taste. Understand?”

Monica nodded and continued to drink the warm chocolate with care.

As he watched her, he suddenly seemed to remember something. “Just one more thing. Don’t tell the prince about this. Especially the chocolate. It’s—”

“U-um, Lord Ashley...,” interrupted Monica nervously.

Cyril’s brow furrowed as he glared at her. “What?”

“The prince, he’s...”

“What about him?”

“...Right...behind you.”

The blood drained from Cyril’s face.

Felix was standing directly behind him, smiling. Cyril hadn’t even noticed—the prince’s skill for sneaking up on people would probably put a professional assassin to shame.



“Secretly feeding the little squirrel, are we?” asked Felix. “My, that’s unfair, isn’t it, Cyril?”

“P-P-P-P-Prince?!” stammered Cyril.

“I never thought I’d hear someone other than Monica say my title quite like that.”

“Oh, no, I mean, this is...,” said Cyril, flustered and glancing at his cup. It almost seemed like he was trying to hide the chocolate from Felix.

Felix just watched him, his usual tranquil smile on his face. “You don’t need to hide it. I really don’t mind.”

“B-but...”

The way Cyril was acting, you’d think he’d just been caught in possession of an illegal drug. Why was he so upset?

“I’d like some chocolate as well,” said Felix. “Would you mind making it for me?”

Cyril seemed somehow relieved by that. “Yes, sir!” he replied and hastened out of the room.

Felix watched him go, sighing. “He really *doesn’t* need to be so worried,” he remarked.

Not understanding their exchange, Monica hesitantly asked, “U-um... Are we...not supposed to have chocolate?”

“Of course you can have chocolate. It’s quite popular among this kingdom’s nobility, after all.”

Then why was Cyril so distressed? wondered Monica, confused.

Felix continued, his voice casual, “The technology to remove fat content from cocoa beans is something a scholar from the Kingdom of Landor invented.”

Landor was a small kingdom located between the Kingdom of Ridill and the Empire to the east. But what could an inventor from Landor have to do with Cyril’s strange attitude? Monica couldn’t quite figure it out.

“The mother of my older brother, Lionel, is a princess of Landor,” explained

Felix.

Finally, Monica realized why Cyril had been so intent on hiding the chocolate from him. This kingdom had three princes, but each had a different mother. The first prince Lionel's mother was a princess of Landor. This meant that many in his faction also valued relations with Landor. Cyril had probably been worried Felix would think he was part of the first prince's faction if he saw him enjoying their new technology.

"So whenever I end up at a tea party, nobody ever serves me chocolate—since it's Landor technology. I don't see why, though. The chocolate's not at fault, and it's delicious. Isn't that all that matters?" said Felix, plucking Monica's cup out of her hands and taking a sip.

If Cyril had seen the prince put his mouth on something another person had already used, his eyes would have popped out of his head. But this time, Monica saw the clear intent behind his action. Felix really *didn't* care about trivial things like that.

"...It must be difficult, being royalty and all," she said.

"You can say that again," replied Felix. His face in profile lacked its usual calm. Instead, it held a cold disdain, as if he found something utterly ridiculous.



CHAPTER 10

A Blissful Promise

Most of the students at Serendia Academy ate lunch in the student cafeteria inside the school building. A few would have their meal brought to their room, but that was fairly uncommon. Nearly all the students ate in the cafeteria.

...But in truth, Monica had yet to eat in the cafeteria even once. The reason was obvious—she was scared of the crowd. Instead, whenever lunchtime came around, she'd find a deserted spot and munch on the berries she'd put in her pocket.

On this day, though, she'd been invited by Casey and Lana to eat with them in the cafeteria, and so here she was. As she walked through the space for the first time, sandwiched between the two girls, her expression was frozen stiff with tension.

Whenever she heard the word *cafeteria*, Monica always thought of the one at Minerva's. There, you would walk up to the counter, pick something off the menu, pay the price, and receive a wooden card with the meal you had ordered noted on it. You'd then show the card to the person at the meal counter and exchange it for your tray of food.

Monica had figured that Serendia's student cafeteria would work the same way, but it was actually very different than what she'd imagined.

This cafeteria essentially worked like a high-class restaurant. Once you arrived, you were shown to a table by an attendant, who would then take your order and bring the food to your table. The price of the food was tallied up alongside tuition, so students didn't pay in the cafeteria. Those who wished to do so could also have the food delivered to their room. Everything had been thought of.

It's...amazing..., thought Monica. Many of the students at Minerva's had been nobles as well, and its facilities had hardly been shabby—but Serendia was on an entirely different level. Clearly, no expense had been spared.

Monica fidgeted as she and the other girls were seated by the attendant. As she sat, someone quietly slid into the seat next to her. She'd been looking down the entire time, so she figured it was Lana or Casey. But when she raised her head, she saw them both sitting across from her.

...Then who had sat down next to her?

Awkwardly, she turned to look—and saw Claudia Ashley, with her black hair and depressing aura.

“What are you doing here?!” exclaimed Lana angrily, glaring at the newcomer.

Claudia leaned in closer to Monica.

“...What do you mean?” she said. “We’re friends, you know. Isn’t that right? ... *Monica dearest.*”

Totally petrified, Monica let out a few strange sounds but was otherwise unable to speak.

Claudia brought her white-gloved fingers up to Monica’s face and stroked her cheek. Why did it feel like a snake slithering across her skin?

“...I *did* save your life, didn’t I?”

“Y-yes!”

“...And you *are* thankful, aren’t you?”

“Yes!”

“...Which means we’re friends, doesn’t it?”

“Yes!” Monica nodded shakily.

Claudia, confident in her victory, grinned.

Lana was enraged. “Don’t force her to say things like that!” she shouted.

“All right, all right,” said Casey in an attempt to pacify her before holding out the menu. “Let’s not be unsociable. Why don’t we put in our orders?”

“...Oh, but I wasn’t being unsociable,” pointed out Claudia. “That girl is simply flailing about of her own accord...isn’t she?”

Lana ground her teeth at the obviously provocative remark.

Casey looked between the two of them with an exasperated expression. “Both of you, settle down and let Monica order. Oh, and Monica, I would recommend this fried fish platter. It has an amazing special sauce. And if you like fish, I’d also recommend this sautéed dish here.”

“O-okay, then I’ll go with that...”

In truth, Monica earned a handsome income as one of the Seven Sages, so she had plenty of money. She didn’t particularly care what she got off the menu. In fact, she didn’t care much about food at all, so she was very grateful that someone had given her recommendations.

After a short wait, their food arrived. In front of Monica, the attendant placed a tray containing a grilled white fish sauté, bread, and soup.

From the sauté came the delicious scent of lemon and butter. Monica nervously tried a bite. The soft fish melted in her mouth.

Most of the fish she’d eaten while living in the mountains had been either salted down or smoked. She would either roast them over a flame or soak them in hot water to make a soup.

The texture of a sautéed fish was very new to her. After the powerful taste of butter filled her mouth, the refreshing, subtle flavor of the lemon tickled her tongue. It was amazing.

“...The fish is delicious,” she mumbled.

Lana, tearing off a piece of bread, nodded as if Monica’s reaction was to be expected. “You probably don’t get many chances to eat seafood in Kerbeck, huh?”

“N-no.” Monica hadn’t technically lived in Kerbeck, but her home was similarly landlocked, and she shook her head awkwardly.

Casey nodded, as if reflecting on this herself. “I’m the same. My homeland is also far from the sea, so if we ever eat fish, it’s mostly ones from the river that we roast,” she explained, splitting her bread in two, putting vegetables and fried fish between the pieces, and stuffing them into her mouth.

Her method of eating earned a frown from Claudia. "...That's how laborers eat."

"Everyone back home eats like this," explained Casey, unfazed by the black-haired girl's astonished look. "When we get a break from farmwork, that is. Of course, we don't use fried fish—we usually use pickles."

Monica envied how the other girl didn't seem to care what others thought. She was strong.

Casey swallowed a big bite of her bread, then wiped her mouth with a napkin. She continued casually, "And where I come from, the nobles and laborers are the same. If we don't all put in the work, we won't have enough food to go around."

"...I'm surprised you were able to come here," remarked Claudia.

"You can go ahead and say what you're thinking—you're surprised such poor nobles were able to afford the tuition. I feel the same way. I really was lucky to be able to enroll here. Someone with a connection supported me."

Rather than acting humble, Casey appeared nonchalant. She didn't seem to consider her circumstances unfortunate.

But then, as if she was uncomfortable having those around her fuss over the matter, she grinned a little and changed the topic. "By the way, have you all decided what you want to do at the school festival next month?"

Claudia, face still gloomy, said, "...I'll be in my room until the ball." Her constant melancholy was ruining Casey's efforts to change the mood.

Casey pursed her lips, then forced a smile. "Ha-ha... I didn't expect to hear that... But I guess you are pretty popular, Lady Claudia. You're one of the academy's three beauties, after all."

The academy's three beauties—the term was unfamiliar to Monica. As she chewed on her bread, she tilted her head in confusion.

Lana lowered her voice and explained. "She means Lady Bridget Greyham, who is in her third year, and Lady Eliane Hyatt and Lady Claudia, who are first-year students."

Monica had never heard the name Eliane, but Bridget and Claudia certainly possessed incredible beauty. The first was the flowery sort, with rich blond hair and amber eyes, while Claudia was more mysterious, with black hair and eyes the color of lapis lazuli. The two of them standing next to each other would probably attract even more attention.

Most of the students at Serendia Academy were the children of nobles, so many of them were already engaged to someone. This was also true of Claudia.

But some, even though—or perhaps *because*—they were engaged, wished to enjoy the ups and downs of romance free of such arrangements while they were still at school. For such people, the gorgeous Claudia was a target of admiration.

Because of that, there had been a whole line of boys asking her to the school festival's ball the year before.

"...Neil is so busy with student council work that he has almost no time during the day to do what he wants," droned Claudia. "There isn't much point in my attending the festival."

"Unbelievable!" exclaimed Lana, glowering. "You absolutely *must* see the play this year! The costumes are incredible! After all, I was the one who oversaw them. In fact, I insist it's worth a look just for the outfits. Plus, we're using fireworks in the production. It will be splendid!"

Lana puffed out her chest as she spoke, earning a pained grin from Casey. "Yeah, and that argument you had with the girl from the historical society was definitely something..."

Casey explained that Lana, who had been selected to take charge of costumes for the play—the highlight of the school festival—had gotten into an impassioned debate with a student from the historical society. The president of said society had insisted they should use costumes purely based in tradition, while Lana had argued they should use more flowery ones that featured a few of the latest trends. Their debate had raged for days, and in the end, the two had shaken hands like old war buddies.

Every year, as a tradition, Serendia Academy put on a play that told the story of how the first king founded the kingdom. It was a story everyone heard when

they were young.

Around a thousand years ago, Ralph, the first king of the Kingdom of Ridill, had formed a contract with each of the seven Spirit Kings—fire, water, earth, lightning, wind, light, and darkness—to bring peace to a land ravaged by wicked dragons; he then borrowed the spirits’ power to slay the beasts. And with peace restored, he founded a kingdom.

Apparently, this play was the highlight of Serendia’s school festival every year.

“Monica, Casey, we should go see the play together on the day of the festival!” said Lana. “...Though it seems a certain *someone* will be lazing around in her room at that time.”

Her jab was aimed at Claudia, but the black-haired girl seemed not to notice.

Lana pouted and turned away from her before continuing. “After watching the play, we can listen to the music club perform and take a look at the charity bazaar. Oh, speaking of which—weren’t you putting up embroidery at the bazaar, Casey?”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Casey nodded, taking a handkerchief out of her pocket. “Something like this.”

The handkerchief had small yellow flowers embroidered on it. Lana observed it closely, her face locking into the appraising stare of a merchant. “You have skill,” she said.

Monica looked at it, too, and gave her own straightforward impression. “I think...it’s really cute.”

Casey scratched her cheek in embarrassment and laughed. “Aha-ha. Thanks. I’m actually pretty competent at it. Yellow flowers symbolize happiness where I’m from, so we embroider them a lot. Once I meet the quota for the bazaar, would you like me to make you something, too, Monica?”

“Um, b-but I...,” stammered Monica, looking down apologetically.

Casey frowned a little. “Oh, do you not like flowers?”

Monica shook her head. “It’s just that you already promised to teach me horseback riding, so...I felt a little, um, guilty.”

Electives started next week, and Casey had already promised to help Monica with one of hers. *I can't possibly ask her to embroider something for me*, Monica thought, still looking down at her lap.

Then Casey leaned across the table and started mussing up Monica's hair. "No feeling guilty! I'm offering to do both because I want to!"

"Um, okay...", said Monica quietly, nodding and playing with her fingers. "I'm looking forward to it. Um... The riding, and the embroidery, and the school festival... All of it."

School festivals at Minerva's had mainly involved everyone showing the results of their research. As a scholarship student, Monica had naturally been expected to submit something fairly significant, so she'd been busy writing essays and creating materials. Back then, she would hole up in a laboratory the day of the event and spend all her time preparing her exhibit as best she could, so she didn't really have a sense of what a school festival was like.

But she could feel the excitement radiating from those around her—more than she'd felt at Minerva's. Monica preferred to stay away from crowded places, and festivals were as crowded as you could get. And yet...

...I think...I'm actually a little excited.

There wasn't anything in particular she wanted to do during the festival, but she hoped it would succeed—that it would go smoothly and without incident.

"Accountant Norton."

Suddenly, someone called her name. She looked up and saw Cyril approaching their table. Automatically, she straightened up.

He handed a piece of paper to her. "We received advance notice from a contractor who will be bringing in materials after school today. As student council members, we need to be present, so come to the east gate once classes are over. This is a list of materials. Be sure to memorize it."

"The...the east gate?" repeated Monica. That one was always closed and almost never saw use.

Cyril gave a short nod. "We have a lot of materials coming in. If every

contractor came through the front gate, they'd obstruct the students."

According to him, they were expecting three contractors, all at the same time. One would bring fabrics and clothing, another fireworks, and the last lumber. The wood was going to be the bulkiest of the three, so they were bringing it in through the east gate.

"His Royal Highness and Secretary Howard will be attending the fireworks, while Secretary Greyham and Officer Maywood will be looking after the clothing. That leaves us for the lumber."

"A-all right," said Monica with a nod.

Claudia, sitting next to her, took a sip of her tea, then muttered, "...How foolish of you to reveal student council plans to a third party."

Cyril frowned and glared at his younger sister. "What's wrong with informing other students of our plans?"

"...It seems Neil will be alone with Bridget Greyham...a woman other than me... I'll have to get in their way."

"Hold it right there!"

Claudia Ashley was the kind of person who would actually go through with what sounded to others like a mean-spirited joke—especially when it came to her fiancé, Neil.

"The contractors will be present for the checks as well," continued Cyril. "They won't be alone. So please do not cause any trouble for them!" He turned back to Monica. "...Also, Accountant Norton, we are in charge of a sizable amount of lumber. Report to the gate as soon as you can."

"Yes, Lord Ashley." Monica nodded as a pair of arms suddenly coiled around her head.

It was Claudia. She'd embraced her from behind, and now she whispered into her ear, "Oh, but you know *my* last name is Ashley, too."

"Um, er, you're Lady Claudia, so I call you that, and... Um, well..."

"...Oh my. She won't even call you by your name, my dear brother. She calls *me* by my first name because we're friends—but I suppose you two are merely

acquaintances. It simply can't be helped. I feel so bad for you, getting the cold shoulder from a younger student... *Dearest elder brother.*" Claudia smiled thinly as she looked up at Cyril.

Cyril grimaced.

Not for the first time, it occurred to Monica that these siblings didn't seem to like each other very much. Lana and Casey appeared bothered by it, too, but they merely looked on in silence.

Monica began to panic. At this rate, it would look like she really was giving him the cold shoulder. "U-um, Lord Ashley... I mean Lord Cyril Ashley, um, well, you're really good at your work, and you're a great person, so, um, I respect you!"

Her frantic attempt to console him only drew Cyril's blue-eyed glare. He was frightening.

"U-um, I-I-I-I'm sorry!" she stammered. "I know—I should have just called you 'Vice President,' right? I'm so sorry, Vice President Ashley!"

Cyril had actually been giving Claudia a bitter look, but from Monica's vantage point, it appeared he was glaring at her. Tears formed in her eyes, and she started to shake.

Finally, he heaved a sigh. "...Just Cyril is fine."

"Y-yes.....Lord Cyril," said Monica in a weak voice.

Claudia gave a short, breathy giggle in Monica's ear. "Oh my! What a commotion my dear brother—a mere acquaintance—is making simply because you called him by his first name."

"By the way, Claudia," retorted Cyril, "I didn't realize you'd finally made a friend."

"I have indeed. Monica and I are on *very* friendly terms. Isn't that right...*Monica dearest?*"

Monica's head bobbed up and down.

Another crease appeared on Cyril's forehead. "Accountant Norton, Claudia isn't forcing you to do this, is she?"

“N-no, not at all...” Monica shook her head.

Claudia tightened her grip, pulling Monica even closer to her. For some reason, she smelled really good, though it did nothing to calm Monica’s pounding heart. What was the deal with this girl?

“...How cruel you are, to be envious of our friendship... You’re jealous that I’m so close with Monica, aren’t you?”

“Nothing could be further from the truth...!” spat Cyril.

“...Would you happen to have a mirror?” suggested Claudia. “You’re making a terrible face right now—it has *envy* written all over it. Perhaps you should take a look for yourself.”

Cyril was only getting more enraged. He was one second away from completely blowing his top.

Frantically, Monica raised her voice. “L-Lord Cyril, you look just the same as you always do! It’s all right!”

After all, he *always* looked this angry around Monica. She wasn’t lying. It *was* just like always.

“...Ah, so you’re envious of everyone all the time, then? Is that it, dearest brother?”

Monica yelped. “I...I didn’t mean it like that...!”

“Accountant Norton!” Cyril exclaimed. “If Claudia is bothering you, just say so!”

“Well, I mean, she’s—”

“...You don’t think I’m a bother, do you, *Monica dearest?*”

“N-noooooo...”

The two siblings were both attractive, one with silver hair and the other with black. Caught between them, Monica felt close to passing out.

Casey, who had been drinking her after-meal tea, seemed fed up with the whole thing. “...Lady Claudia is toying with both of them, isn’t she?” she murmured. The black-haired beauty had Monica *and* Cyril dancing in the palm

of her hand.

Her personality is truly the worst, thought Lana, putting a hand to her temple and sighing.

* * *

Nero, Monica's familiar, generally wandered around outside the school building during the day. Being a remarkably talented familiar, as he was, he certainly didn't spend his time lying around and soaking in the sunlight.

No, right now he was eavesdropping on a class from just outside the window to further his study of humans—and to watch for any suspicious characters who might be near the second prince. A lot of outsiders were coming and going that day, so Nero was being especially cautious of Felix's surroundings.

...The second prince has that contracted spirit with him, though, so he's fairly well protected.

Nero was skilled in detecting mana, so he'd already noticed the spirit taking the form of a white lizard that was always in the prince's pocket. It was probably a high water spirit. And come to think of it, thanks to the magecraft classes he'd been secretly listening in on recently, he was pretty sure that you had to be at least a high mage to form a contract with any spirit at all.

Does that make the prince a mage? he wondered.

Questions like these were best posed to Monica. After all, she was one of the Seven Sages—the top mages in the kingdom. He doubted anyone knew as much about magecraft as she did. As Nero was considering asking her to explain the workings of spirit contracts, he sensed something odd.

His whiskers twitched in concentration—he could sense a weak source of mana. It wasn't unusual for him to sense mana, since they conducted practical magecraft classes at the academy. But it was in a very strange place this time... *Is that a storehouse? Wonder what they're bringing in.*

Several contractors were entering and exiting a large storehouse situated in the western part of the campus, carrying in wooden crates. Nero's skilled nose told him right away that their contents were explosive.

Monica said they were bringing things in for the school festival... Do humans

use explosives for festivals? Or are they going to use them for construction? Nero, who had never seen fireworks before, watched them with suspicion.

The second prince himself—Monica’s charge—was overseeing the carrying of the crates. Next to him was that fellow with the droopy eyes and brown hair who was always saying mean things to Monica.

It...doesn't seem like the prince and Droopy Eyes have noticed the mana coming from the storehouse. Nero had noticed it right away because of his keen magical senses, but apparently humans had a tougher time of it. And now that he was thinking about it, he remembered Monica saying that humans needed specific detection magecraft to manage it at all.

The mana he’d sensed in the storehouse had been faint. But was it just him, or was it growing, ever so slightly, as time passed?

...I have a really bad feeling about this.

Nero hopped down from a tree and raced to the east gate to find Monica.

* * *

When Monica headed to the east gate after class as instructed, she found that they were already bringing in the supplies. Cyril was next to the east storehouse giving instructions to the contractors.

She rushed over as fast as her clumsy legs would carry her. When Cyril spotted her, he frowned and yelled, “You’re late!”

“Lord...Cyril, I’m...I’m so...s-sorry...,” she stammered, wheezing. She had no stamina, and the short run here had left her completely out of breath.

Cyril knew how slow she was. He looked down at her as she gasped, and he massaged his temples. “Catch your breath already. You sound awful. They just started bringing things in a minute ago. This is going to take a while anyway.”

“A-all right...”

“Also, whoever’s in charge of performing arts was supposed to come here and check the supplies...” Cyril scanned his surroundings, then spotted a figure heading this way from the school building. “Looks like she’s here.”

Monica followed his gaze, then blinked in surprise. The girl coming toward

them looked full of energy, her light-brown hair tied behind her head—it was Casey.

“Sorry for being late, sir!” she apologized. “I’m Casey Grove, a second-year. The one in charge of performing arts got into an argument with the period research team... I doubted they’d be done anytime soon, so I came here instead.”

“All right,” said Cyril. “It’s just a numbers check, so it doesn’t matter who does it.”

“Thank you, sir! And hello, Monica.”

Monica nodded at her. Considering how much trouble she had with strangers, seeing Casey was a big relief. Monica was shy, and while she never struggled with even the most involved numerical work, giving reports and instructions were all about interpersonal communication, and that was far more difficult for her.

As she sighed in relief, Cyril began his instructions. “I’m going to tell the contractors where to put the supplies. Accountant Norton, you check the list and make sure nothing’s missing.”

“Y-yes, sir.” Monica nodded.

Casey patted her on the shoulder. “I’ll help you out. We can check all the supplies together.”

“Th-thank you!”

“You’re welcome,” said Casey with a cheerful grin, taking the list. But after looking at the names and amounts of all the supplies, her smile disappeared, and her face tensed. “Whoa. That’s a lot of numbers...”

Monica was the type whose heart fluttered when she saw densely packed groups of numbers, but that was a trait most people didn’t seem to share. Casey was no exception; she grimaced and held the list out to Monica. “I’ll just count what’s actually here,” she said, “so can you match the numbers up to the list?”

“Yes!” Monica was great when it came to verification work.

With a wry grin, Casey gave the list back to her and jogged over to the supplies that had already been brought in.

Most of this shipment consisted of already processed lumber. It had come in a variety of forms—some were thin planks while others were cylindrical poles. A few of them had already been assembled into smaller structures. They were probably all props for the play.

Casey counted up each kind of lumber, and Monica compared what she said with what was written on the list. After repeating the process a few times, Monica looked up on a whim. Casey was nowhere to be found.

“...Huh?” she murmured, looking around for the other girl. “Casey?”

Then she heard Casey’s voice call out, “Over here!” from behind some of the lumber. They were done with most of the checks in the back of the storehouse, and Monica realized it might be a good idea to move a little closer to the entrance. Just as she took a step toward her friend, she heard the sound of something ripping.

...Huh?

A moment later, a stack of wooden beams toppled over. They had been tied together with rope and stood against the wall. The rope had torn.

“Monica, over here!” Casey repeated—right in the way of the falling lumber. She didn’t realize the danger she was in.

“Get out of the way!” yelled Cyril from outside the storehouse before quickly beginning to chant a spell.

Although he was probably trying to use magecraft to help her, the lumber was very nearly at the girl’s head. If someone had to chant, they wouldn’t make it in time.

Yes—if someone had to chant.

Please be in time...! thought Monica, immediately setting off an uncharmed wind spell. She calculated where the lumber would fall based on its current position and angle, then used the minimum amount of force to knock it away from Casey.

“Eeeeeek?!”

Casey’s shriek rang out at the same time as the lumber clattered to the floor.

Monica felt a cold sweat on her back... *Did I make it?*

“Are you two all right?!” yelled Cyril, his face pale as he ran to them. Monica nodded, then wobbled over to Casey.

She was sitting on the floor, but she seemed unhurt. Just as Monica had calculated, each length of wood had fallen slightly away from her. Even so, one wrong step and she could have been crushed. Casey was shaking. Her face was white as a sheet.

“Casey, are you...are you all right...?” Monica asked.

Casey nodded, her expression tense.

“Are either of you injured?!” demanded Cyril, looking between them both to check. Monica was fine, of course, and Casey was unhurt as well. Cyril, always one to make absolutely sure, ordered both of them to go to the infirmary. “I’ll take over here. We may need to follow up with the contractors about how this accident happened. I want both of you to take a break.”

“A-all right,” said Monica, extending a hand down to Casey. “Can you stand?” she asked.

Casey nodded, took her hand, and managed to get to her feet. Monica glanced one last time at the rope that had been holding the lumber together, bit her lip, and headed off together with Casey.

* * *

Casey had always been the kind of girl who would give you a cheerful, energetic smile. She was the reliable big sister who would take Monica’s hand and lead her ahead.

But now, she was practically clinging to Monica’s hand as they walked side by side. Monica could feel the cold sweat on the other girl’s palm—the way she was trembling. As Monica stared at her friend’s hand, Casey tried to smile, but her face was still pale.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “This is, um, kind of embarrassing, huh?”

“N-no, after something like that...anyone would have the same reaction,” Monica reassured her.

“Ha-ha. I suppose so.” Casey tried to laugh like she always did, but it came out sounding awkward. That, plus her drained face and unsteady, trembling hand, bore a hole in Monica’s heart.

The two of them walked down the school’s east hallway. They were still a little ways from the infirmary.

Monica bit her lip one more time; then she spoke. “The rope tying the wood together... I could see that it was cut by a blade.”

“Huh? Then it wasn’t just an accident...,” Casey said. “Was it torn from the start? Or was one of the contractors...going after someone?”

Monica slowly shook her head. “When I looked closely, I could see it was cut halfway through first so that it would tear later on its own. I calculated it—exactly how many seconds it would take for a cut of that depth to cause the rope to tear.” Explaining that she didn’t know the exact weight of the rope, so she could only make an estimate, she said, “It would have been somewhere from five to fifteen seconds.”

With a cut like that, the rope would completely tear after about ten seconds. In other words, it hadn’t been cut before being brought into the academy—someone inside the storehouse had done it. And Monica knew that they were now running inspections on anyone entering the academy, on account of the incident with the intruders, so the contractors couldn’t have brought in a blade. If they needed one, they’d have to fill out a form from the school and borrow it.

“...The contractors couldn’t have brought in a knife, so they couldn’t have...made the cut in the rope.”

All expression vanished from Casey’s face.

Monica’s throat tensed, almost hiccupping. “Did you...cut that rope, Casey?”

Casey’s hand slipped out of hers. She walked a few steps out in front of Monica, then stopped.

When she turned around, the same old smile she always had was back on her

face.

“Aha-ha,” she laughed. “Guess you found me out... Yep, I was the one who made the cut.”

It was a shockingly straightforward confession, and Casey even took a small knife from her pocket and held it out.

“Ah...,” Monica breathed, her voice nearly imperceptible. “But...why...?”

“Because I don’t like you, so I wanted to have a little fun. I actually meant the wood to fall on you. But I messed it up, and it fell on me instead. Man, what a screwup.”

Monica could tell from her tone and the way she laughed that Casey was trying to sound normal. There was just something about it that made it all seem like an act. It felt like she was reading lines she’d come up with in advance. She spoke the words more quickly than she usually did, and her eyes never looked straight at Monica.

Casey was lying.

“You’re...lying,” said Monica.

“No I’m not. I’ve hated you from the moment I met you.”

Her words gouged at Monica’s heart. Any other time, she probably would have gotten teary-eyed and hung her head.

But this all felt so *wrong* that it overrode her normal response. “Casey, what are you hiding?” she asked.

“Oh, please. I’m not hiding anything. I hate you. I tried to do something mean to you. That’s it.” Casey’s lips twisted up into a cruel smile. “Do you remember when your tea leaves got thrown away during class?”

“...Yes.”

“I was the one who did it.”

Her indifferent tone, her unapologetic attitude—despite all of it, Monica felt no anger well up within her. She just felt something was very wrong—that, and she felt sad. She looked down.

“...I knew,” she murmured.

“Huh?” Casey blinked.

Monica gripped her skirt. “...People have always bullied me...and hid things from me... That’s why I never write my name on any of my belongings.”

When Monica had put her jars of leaves on the shelf, Casey had given her a piece of paper to mark them with. Casey had written her name on hers, but Monica hadn’t out of worry that someone would throw them out. So instead, she’d made the bellows-shaped folds so that only she would know whose it was.

“When I did that,” she continued, “...you were the only one who saw me.”

Always timid, always careful, Monica had made sure to position herself so others wouldn’t see her make the folds in the paper or place her jars on the shelf... In other words, Casey was the only one who could have known those jars were hers. What’s more, Casey didn’t have a servant, so she’d been in the room with the jars a little before Monica in order to prepare her tea. That was when she must have dumped out the leaves.

Casey appeared shocked by Monica’s accusation, but after a few moments, she pushed up her bangs and gave a hollow laugh.

“Aha-ha. I knew you were smart. I see... So you’ve known all this time.”

“But...you always helped me...so I thought...maybe I was mistaken...”

When Monica felt defeated after her tea leaves were thrown out, Casey had offered her own. And that wasn’t all—Casey had helped her practice dancing and invited her to lunch, too. She was always concerned for Monica. Always helping her out.

That was why Monica had ignored the truth for so long. She’d told herself she had to be mistaken.

As she stood there about to cry, Casey spoke.

“To be honest, I want to marry the prince and become queen in the future. I thought that if I was friends with you—the one he pays so much attention to—I would have more chances to get close to him. That was why I was so nice to you

and why I pretended to be your friend... Ha-ha. I'm the worst, aren't I?"

While her voice was the same one Monica knew so well, it sounded so flimsy. Her words seemed to make sense at face value. But Monica still felt something wasn't right about her story, and the feeling wouldn't go away.

Monica was terrible at social interaction. In the past, she'd never observed someone who was standing right in front of her so closely.

But after coming to this school and meeting so many new people, Monica had finally learned just a little of what it was like to *know* someone else.

And because of that, she could say for certain that Casey was hiding something.

She just couldn't figure out what. Monica clutched the chest area of her uniform in frustration. *What is she hiding?* Her gut told her that she had to figure it out soon or there would be no going back.

Suddenly, one of the hallway windows burst open, and a man came flying through. "Monica!"

No student of Serendia Academy would ever do something as absurd as come in through a window, even if it *was* the first floor. And indeed, it was no student—it was Nero, transformed into a black-haired young man.

Although he usually wore his old-fashioned robe, he now wore Serendia's boys' uniform.

"...N-Ne...ro?" stammered Monica. "Your clothes..."

"Yeah, pretty awesome, right? I really put my best paw forward replicating these babies! The fabric might be a little thin, since I had to go by what I saw, but... Anyway, that's not what I'm here for." Nero's sharp eyes turned westward, and he spoke quickly. "I detected weird mana from the west storehouse. And it's steadily getting stronger."

Casey had been surprised by the mysterious man and his unusual entrance, but when she heard those last words, the blood drained from her face.

Monica immediately cast a detection spell without chanting. She could sense it—from the direct opposite side of the school building, in the west storehouse.

The signature was disguised to prevent detection; if Nero hadn't pointed it out, she wouldn't have noticed it.

Fire element. Absorbing and compressing the surrounding mana. Mana whirling like a vortex on the inside. This is... No!

Back when she'd attended Minerva's, Monica had seen this particular mana flow before, in a magic-item class. It was an *extremely* lethal magic item meant for assassination, and its name was...

"...Spiralflame."

The moment the word passed Monica's lips, Casey's eyes went wide. "How do you know that name, Monica...?" she squeaked.

Everything Casey had done up until now suddenly made perfect sense. They were currently bringing fireworks into the west storehouse. Felix and Elliott were the ones overseeing it.

Casey had a different reason for getting close to Monica and pretending to be her friend.

"You're...trying to...assassinate the prince?"

Casey didn't answer. But the tension on her face said everything.



CHAPTER 11

My Responsibility

The school festival would use two main types of fireworks. The first was the type that would be shot into the sky at regular intervals, and the second was the type used for plays. The former would be brought in on the day before the festival, but the latter would be used during rehearsals as well, so it needed to be brought in earlier.

Aside from student council members Felix and Elliott, Lady Maybell Hanes—in charge of the stage production—was supervising as well. Expert contractors would be the ones actually handling the fireworks during the stage play, but Maybell would need to be advised on their handling as the one in charge.

Maybell Hanes was an intelligent student in her third year. Her glasses suited her features well, and she could usually be found by a window quietly reading a book. She was famous, though, for how her eyes lit up and she practically became a different person whenever it came to the topic of stage production.

Maybell sidled up to Felix as he observed the contractors' work. "Priiince?" she whispered, her voice exaggerated and fawning. "Have you considered what we talked about?"

"Appearing in the play?" asked Felix. "I believe I turned you down when you first suggested it."

"I am keenly aware that your student council duties keep you extremely busy. It wouldn't be for long, though—just a moment. Won't you please make an appearance as the first king, just for the final scene?"

Maybell was putting on so much pressure that even Elliott, who was standing next to Felix and looking at the list, silently took a few steps away. Felix cast a glance at the other boy as he replied. "Someone else will be playing the part the rest of the time," he explained. "If I was to suddenly replace him in the final scene, the play would only suffer."

"Oh! Oh, why, that's not true at *all*. I have no doubt that all who see you

onstage will both cheer and break down in tears! Yes! Yes, I can hear them now—the voices of the audience, applause strong enough to split the earth!”

“You’re exaggerating,” said Felix, paying her no mind. Maybell was usually modest and taciturn, the very picture of a lady. It was just that, when it came to stage production, she got a little too passionate.

“If I had my way,” continued Maybell, “you would be the first king; Lord Cyril would be Sheffield, King of the Wind Spirits; Lady Bridget would be Luluchera, King of the Water Spirits; and Lord Elliott would be Archraedo, King of the Earth Spirits... Everyone in the student council is so gorgeous, after all! Simply having you all stand onstage would be *incredible!*”

Felix pretended not to hear her as he continued checking the crates in silence.

Maybell walked around so she’d be in front of him, then looked up, her eyes more stifflingly passionate than those of a maiden in love. “Please, might you find it in your heart to reconsider? Lady Eliane is playing the queen, and she has said she would very much like you to be the hero, Ralph.”

“.....Really?” As soon as he heard the name Eliane, a slight shadow came over Felix’s blue eyes. But his calm smile remained. “Then allow me to give an official answer,” he said. “Members of the student council cannot take part in the play. And should you continue to insist, I shall have to treat it as interfering with student council duties.”

“Urk!” Maybell grunted, very unladylike, at the prince’s firm rejection before biting down on her handkerchief.

Seeing this, Felix dropped his harsh tone. “I trust that the play will be a success even if I don’t appear in it,” he said. “I’d like you to make it a wonderful occasion—I’m expecting a lot.”

Now even Maybell couldn’t push any further. After skillfully fending her off, Felix returned to his verification work as Elliott, who had been watching from a few steps away, casually walked back over.

“You handled her well,” commented Elliott. “A silver tongue as usual... But are you sure about this? If Lady Eliane wants you to be her partner...”

Eliane was Felix’s second cousin. Duke Clockford seemed to be eyeing her as

the prince's future fiancée. But Felix couldn't care less about that. He shrugged. "I was being honest about how busy we are with our work. My hands are tied. I'm sure Lady Eliane will understand."

"Giving one of the school's three beauties the cold shoulder?" remarked Elliott. "Others would kill to be in your position."

"You don't really think that," murmured Felix, quietly enough not to be heard, lowering his gaze to his own list.

It wasn't as though the prince hated the fiancée Duke Clockford had arranged for him—he just wasn't interested. He wasn't interested in anything: not marriage candidates, nor the bright future awaiting him, nor anything else, really.

...And yet I must still become king, he thought. Even if others call me Duke Clockford's puppet.

* * *

"...I can't let Duke Clockford's puppet become king," growled Casey, gritting her teeth. Her usual energetic smile was gone, replaced with dark shades of hopelessness.

It was then that Monica finally understood.

Casey had made the wood fall on herself to stage an accident—and give herself an alibi. If two incidents were to happen in the same day, most people would assume a single party had been targeting Felix with *both* of them. Involving herself in one of them would draw suspicion away from her.

If Casey had gotten crushed by the beams and been badly hurt, nobody would have suspected her. She'd be able to pretend she was just collateral damage.

So that's why she...did something so dangerous..., thought Monica. One wrong move, and the lumber could have killed her. Casey was walking a thin tightrope—one that sent a shiver up Monica's spine.

"But why...? Casey, why...?"

Why did she need to go so far as to try and kill Felix? She'd smuggled in a dangerous magic item, tried to fake an accident, and even plotted her own alibi. Monica couldn't understand her.

Casey's lips drew back into a grin, her expression still twisted in despair. "If Prince Felix ascends the throne...then Duke Clockford, who controls him, will start a war with the Kingdom of Landor. The puppet second prince wouldn't be able to stop it."

The Kingdom of Landor was a small nation adjacent to both Ridill and the Empire and the birthplace of the first prince's mother. Before, over chocolate, Felix had explained to Monica the strength of the ties between the first prince's faction and Landor.

...What he *hadn't* mentioned was how the second prince's faction felt toward the other nation.

"Do you remember that earth dragon that showed up near Craeme a little while ago?" asked Casey.

Why is she bringing that up now? wondered Monica, nodding weakly. She couldn't possibly forget it. She'd slain it herself, then concealed it and let Glenn take the credit.

"When I heard a passing mage had slain it," explained Casey, "I was relieved... but also envious. When an earth dragon appeared in my homeland, we had no mages to stop it. An entire village and so many people—gone, just like that."

Even if a mage had been present, it wouldn't have been an easy task to slay a dragon. With their high resistance to mana, you couldn't kill one without hitting it exactly between the eyes.

Casey must know that. But the warped look on her face told Monica she couldn't help but feel envious despite herself. That was the face of someone who had seen many dragonraids and lost much that was important to her.

"You see, my homeland is on the border with Landor. The dragonraids are awful there, but we don't have the money to rely on other nobles. The suffering is constant."

It would take time for the Dragon Knights to arrive from the capital, and they would need to pay for assistance from nearby nobles with ready combat forces. Certain nobles like Count Kerbeck provided military support to nearby houses, but it wasn't charity work. It took vast funding to maintain an army.

“We had no soldiers and no money,” continued Casey. “Both the people and the land itself were exhausted from fighting dragons. And yet, this nation never reached out to help us.”

Monica had heard about the discord between center nobles and country nobles. The capital’s Dragon Knights were the best of the best, but the reality was that they wouldn’t act on the threat of a single lesser dragon.

“Landor helped us in secret. My family has had exchanges with Landor for generations... They secretly dispatched knights across the border to save my home.”

King Landor sending knights across a border in secret broke international regulations, of course. But how grateful must Casey and the others have been after living their lives in constant fear of dragons?

Ridill’s Dragon Knights were always dispatched based on a system of priority. It wasn’t difficult to imagine them leaving a small, penniless region in the countryside for later. Naturally, Casey would feel more of an obligation to Landor for saving them than to her own kingdom.

“Prince Felix is under the protection of Duke Clockford, who wants to invade Landor. He eventually wants war with the Empire, and Landor is a stepping-stone to that.”

Despair, as well as an intense fury, lurked deep in Casey’s eyes. Monica was reflected in them, terrified and unable to move. Casey spat out her words.

“I can’t forgive them—neither Duke Clockford nor the puppet second prince.”

Casey pointed the knife in her hand at Monica. Nero immediately jumped in and twisted her wrist. As he held her down, his golden eyes looked toward the west—toward Felix and Elliott.

“What do we do, Monica?!” he demanded. “The west storehouse is getting worse!”

“.....!”

Spiralflame was a magic item created for the purpose of assassination; it was about as big as a broach, and it could fit in your palm. Once activated, it would

draw in mana from the surrounding area and store it up before eventually expelling it again in an explosive firestorm. The flames whirled around at a high speed to penetrate targets, which was how it got its name.

It was known to be especially lethal. Spiralflame's fire was powerful enough to pierce most defensive barriers with ease; for that reason, it was also known as a mage killer. Its weakness was its small effective area. Despite its strength, it couldn't reach very far.

But if it went off in a storehouse full of explosives, it could cause much, much more damage. And that's just where it had been placed—Casey had been deadly serious about this.

Spiralflames were tools meant to assassinate someone with a high rate of success. Not even Casey falling unconscious or losing her life would stop it. The only way was for Casey to personally give the stop command to the magic item.

"Please... Please, Casey... Stop the Spiralflame...!" begged Monica.

Still pinned down by Nero, Casey slowly shook her head. "I won't. Even if you torture me, I won't call it off. I must carry out Prince Felix's assassination."

The ruthlessness of her determination frightened Monica. No matter how much she cried or wailed, Casey would probably never stop the item.

"Hey! Monica, we don't have time!" Nero yelled. Monica had been standing, frozen in place.

Tears formed in her eyes. How she would have liked to just break down and cry like a child.

But if Monica did nothing, there would be massive casualties. The academy would be thrown into chaos, and Felix as well as anyone nearby would either be injured or lose their lives.

I can't let that happen... Monica shut her eyes over her tears. If Monica Norton's responsibility as student council accountant was acting in a manner befitting of her position...

...Then this is...my responsibility as the Silent Witch, one of the Seven Sages.

She'd gotten help from everyone else when it came to dancing and tea

parties, but this was one thing she had to do on her own.

Shoving back down the whines and complaints that were bubbling up in her throat, Monica thought through every option available to her for resolving the current situation.

Use an amplification spell to warn all the students to retreat? No. I can't use words to convince people—they'll never believe me. Use a wind spell to knock the Spiralflame into the air? ...No. The Spiralflame is affixed to something when used, so it's probably attached to the wall or floor. And since it drains the surrounding mana, one wrong move could cause it to explode at the same time my spell goes off.

In the end, the best option she could come up with was to enclose the Spiralflame in a barrier to hold in the effects. Since Monica could use remote magecraft, she could just barely put a barrier up from here. The issue would be its strength. The item was destructive enough to rip through most barriers.

If I pour all my mana into it, I could dampen the Spiralflame's impact...but that won't be enough. I have to stifle it completely or it'll ignite the fireworks, and everything will go up in flames anyway. I'd need a barrier at least as powerful as Mr. Louis's—

And then she had an epiphany.

She ran over to the window and told her familiar, “Nero, I’m going to attack the academy.”

“...Wait. What?”

“Remember how Mr. Louis said a defensive barrier will activate if the school is attacked from the outside? Find the source of that barrier.”

Without waiting for an answer, Monica used unchanted magecraft to create several powerful spears made of wind.

Attack spells generally appeared near the caster, then flew toward the target. But Monica instead used advanced remote magecraft to create the spears outside the campus, then used them to attack the academy.

This school was protected by a large-scale defensive barrier created by the

Barrier Mage Louis Miller. If Monica fired spears at it, the barrier would register them as an attack from outside and immediately deploy across the entire academy.

The firm barrier easily repelled her wind spears. As expected of the Barrier Mage—his work was in a league of its own.

“Nero!” she shouted. “Where’s it coming from?!”

“Close by,” replied Nero. “The old gardens, I think?”

“Bring me there!”

“Gotcha,” said Nero, slinging Casey over his left shoulder and Monica over his right. He then bounded back through the window frame and landed outside, launching into a sprint the moment he hit the ground.

As Nero carried them, Casey glared at Monica. “...Nothing you do will matter,” she said. “The Spiralflame will go off in moments. There’s nothing you can do.”

“You’re wrong,” declared Monica, uncharacteristically firm. Casey’s eyes widened. Pushing aside her usual frightened demeanor, Monica continued in a strong voice, “I’ll be able to stop it... No, I *have* to stop it.” She seemed to be trying to convince herself of what she was saying.

Monica closed her eyes, shut her mouth, and steeled her determination.

After all...I’m the Silent Witch.

* * *

Casey Grove had three older brothers, but all three of them had gone out to fight dragons and never returned.

Her oldest brother had been grabbed by a pterodragon and dropped off a cliff. It had broken his neck, killing him instantly.

Her second brother had been torn apart by a red dragon’s claws. They’d brought back his limbless remains.

Her third brother had been burned to death by the fire breath of a red dragon. His scorched skin had fused with his helmet and armor; unable to take them off, they’d been forced to bury him as he was.

Each time dragons threatened their home, her father would request over and

over for the kingdom to dispatch the Dragon Knights. They almost never arrived on time.

Casey's homeland was called Bright, and it was a low priority for the Kingdom of Ridill. Center nobles barely acknowledged its existence. In fact, the truth was that allowing so many dragon attacks to take place at their borders actually lowered the likelihood of foreign invasion.

Some would even joke that dragons were a better line of defense than weak nobles—without sparing a single thought for the people who lived in those lands.

The dragons had ruined their homeland and stolen their family... But finally, as they struggled in vain, in the depths of despair, the knights of Landor had saved them. In secret, they rode into Bright to exterminate the dragons.

Apparently, they owed the cooperation to the fact that Casey's grandmother had been a marchioness in Landor. Casey and the others living there, who had been abandoned by their own nation, were endlessly grateful for the support.

Ever since then, Casey's father—Count Bright—had been secretly colluding with the nobles of the Kingdom of Landor. Eventually, they began discussing their respective nations' states of affairs. One man who frequently came up was Duke Clockford, a noble of great influence in Ridill.

The duke was the maternal grandfather of the second prince and wielded more authority than anyone else in the kingdom. He had war with the Empire in his sights, and he seemed to be considering an invasion of Landor as a first step. If the second prince became king, this nightmare would be realized.

So Casey had asked her agonized father if there was anything she could do.

Her father, his cheeks sunken, looked conflicted.

He was conflicted because there was something—something she could do.

So then, rather than as a daughter who loved her father, she spoke her next words as a member of House Bright: "Father, if there is anything I can do, you need only give the order."

Hearing the determination in her words, the conflicted expression vanished

from Count Bright's face. "Go to Serendia Academy and seduce Prince Felix. And if that doesn't work..."

He opened a drawer and took out a small box. It contained what appeared to be a broach with a red gemstone embedded in it. But on the reverse side, instead of clasps to secure it to clothing, there were three long vertical rivets. It was meant to be affixed to a surface.

"This is a magical item meant for assassination: Spiralflame... Should the situation arise, use it to kill the prince."

* * *

What in the world is going on...? thought Casey in utter confusion as she rode on the black-haired man's shoulder. This "Nero" person was clearly past the age to attend school, and yet he was wearing a uniform. Stranger still was Monica.

Casey had been surprised that Monica even knew about the Spiralflame, and now the girl had claimed she would disable it.

There's no way she'll be able to do it...

Casey's father had told her just how powerful an item a Spiralflame was. Its flaws were that it took a little bit of time to activate after its user gave the trigger command and that it had a short effective range. She'd been very careful about preparing it beforehand.

She'd want to aim for when the Abbott Company was bringing the fireworks into the storehouse and Felix had already gotten close to trigger the Spiralflame. That way, even if Felix wasn't directly hit by it, he'd be killed in the resulting explosion.

When the robbers had faked being from the Abbott Company and infiltrated the academy, she'd panicked, thinking that it was too soon. That was why she'd snuck over...and how she'd met Monica.

If those intruders had gotten away with the robbery and they'd canceled the school festival, it would have ruined the entire assassination plan as well... It was a stroke of good luck that the horses went out of control and thwarted the robbers.

Above all, it was because of what had happened that she'd grown close to

Monica, a student council member—a council the second prince also sat on. By becoming her friend, she wanted to try and figure out the second prince's plans. That was why she'd been so aggressive in interacting with Monica. Even throwing her tea leaves out during class had been so she could then help her in her time of need and establish a bond of trust. Everything had been in order to create a chance for Casey to assassinate the second prince.

Finally, the contractors had arrived to bring in the fireworks, and the second prince, her target, would be overseeing it. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. She'd already triggered the Spiralflame. Now she just had to wait for it to go off.

...So then why...?

Monica was deep in thought, her face so expressionless, Casey could hardly believe she was the same person.

Casey recognized the look on her face, though. She'd seen it on her brothers' faces—when they'd made the decision to leave and fight the dragons.

* * *

Upon arriving at the entrance to the old gardens and seeing the gate, Nero scrunched up his face. "Gate's closed, Monica. Little high for even me to jump over."

Monica climbed off his shoulder, pointed a finger at the gate's lock—and used an unchartered fire spell. It produced a small fireball about the size of her fingernail. But the attack had been strengthened fourfold, and a mere swing of her finger incinerated the lock easily.

Giving off the odor of burning metal, the lock fell to the ground with a clunk.

Casey gasped. Monica chose not to look back and proceeded into the old gardens. The place hadn't been maintained, and it was covered with weeds. And in the middle of it sat a worn-down fountain.

Monica placed a hand on the edge of the fountain and peered inside. Rainwater had pooled at the bottom of the unused bowl, and it was all covered with moss—behind which she could make out a magical formula.

Nero took a look into the fountain as well, Casey still slung over his shoulder.

“This the barrier? The one that Lountatta guy with the awful personality said he put up to protect the academy? What’re you gonna do with it?”

“I’ll rewrite it to counteract the Spiralflame... Nero, stand back a moment,” said Monica, touching the magic formula at the fountain’s bottom with a finger.

Around the large-scale barrier was a trap that had been set up to activate when someone attempted to rewrite it. Even Monica had no way of knowing what exactly the trap was.

That meant that the only option was to trigger it on purpose, then disable it.

Staying cautious, ready to deploy her own defensive barrier at any time to block the attack, she poured her mana into the magic formula.

...Wait, nothing’s happening. Miss Ryn said there was a trap here—

“Monica, below!” exclaimed Nero, grabbing her by the back of her neck and jumping away.

A moment later, the ground around the fountain rose and fell as something burst out of it.

For a moment, she thought she was seeing the bodies of thin snakes—but on closer inspection, it was a branching clump of green vines. They grew at an alarmingly fast rate, covering up the fountain as they went. Sharp thorns were all over the vines, as well as a few buds here and there. Those buds immediately expanded, blossoming into vivid red roses.

A beautiful rose cage now covered the fountain. It was wonderfully fantastical...but the vines coiled and twisted around the fountain like snakes rearing their heads in warning. If she got too close, it was clear that they’d wrap around her and send her into a world of pain.

Nero scowled and groaned. “Now that’s one killer barrier. I knew your colleague’s personality was awful, but was it *this* bad?”

“...No. I don’t think...that Mr. Louis was the one who made this.”

“Wait, what?”

To control plant life, you used imbuelement magic of the earth element. But such spells were incredibly difficult. And making them grow to full size in an

instant like this wasn't something normal people could pull off.

Monica could think of only one person who could have done this: a mage from the oldest, most historic house in the Kingdom of Ridill, which specialized in imbuing plants with mana—and, in particular, manipulating roses.

"I think this spell belongs to another Sage like me—the Witch of Thorns," said Monica.

Louis had probably constructed the wide-ranging defensive barrier to protect the academy, while the Witch of Thorns had worked on the trap to protect the barrier itself from being rewritten.

In other words, it was a collaboration between two of the Seven Sages.

Nero looked astonished. "...Proving once again that nobody normal is allowed in the Seven Sages."

"Aw," moaned Monica in response, a hand to her chest—just as the rose vines flung out like whips to attack them.

Casey, still on Nero's shoulder, gasped, terrified. Monica, though, didn't bat an eyelash as she used an uncharmed spell to produce a blade of wind to sever the vines.

The vines fell to pieces and dropped limply to the ground as though chopped up by a sharp blade. However, more vines immediately sprouted from the sliced ends. This might go on forever.

If I keep attacking the rose vines like this, I could whittle them down...but it would take too long.

Continuing her offensive with the wind blade, Monica activated a detection spell and checked on the Spiralflame's mana. It had swelled almost to the point of bursting. It probably wouldn't be even three minutes before it exploded.

In those three minutes, she had to destroy this rose cage, disengage the dummy formulae safeguarding against overwriting, and rewrite the defensive barrier to work against the Spiralflame—something impossible for anyone else.

"Now what, Monica?" asked Nero teasingly. Casey just stared at her in sheer disbelief.

But Monica neither heard Nero's voice nor noticed Casey's eyes on her.

She sank into her own consciousness, silent, as if sinking into the depths of the ocean, into a realm with neither light nor sound—a world of beautiful equations and magic formulae, all of which whirled past her at blinding speed. But she wove them anew with precision and beauty.

She seemed to stay in that enchanted state for an eternity. In reality, it was only three seconds. And then, without any chanting, it was complete—a magic formula consisting of an enormous amount of magical symbols.

"Whoa," said Nero, seemingly enjoying himself. "Haven't seen *that* one in a while."

Casey's eyes couldn't have been wider as she stared from the familiar's shoulder and murmured, "What *is* that...?"

White particles of light began to gather above the fountain, coming together to form the shape of a gate.

It was the spell that had appeared in the skies above Kerbeck and slain the dragon—a gate for summoning one of the Spirit Kings.

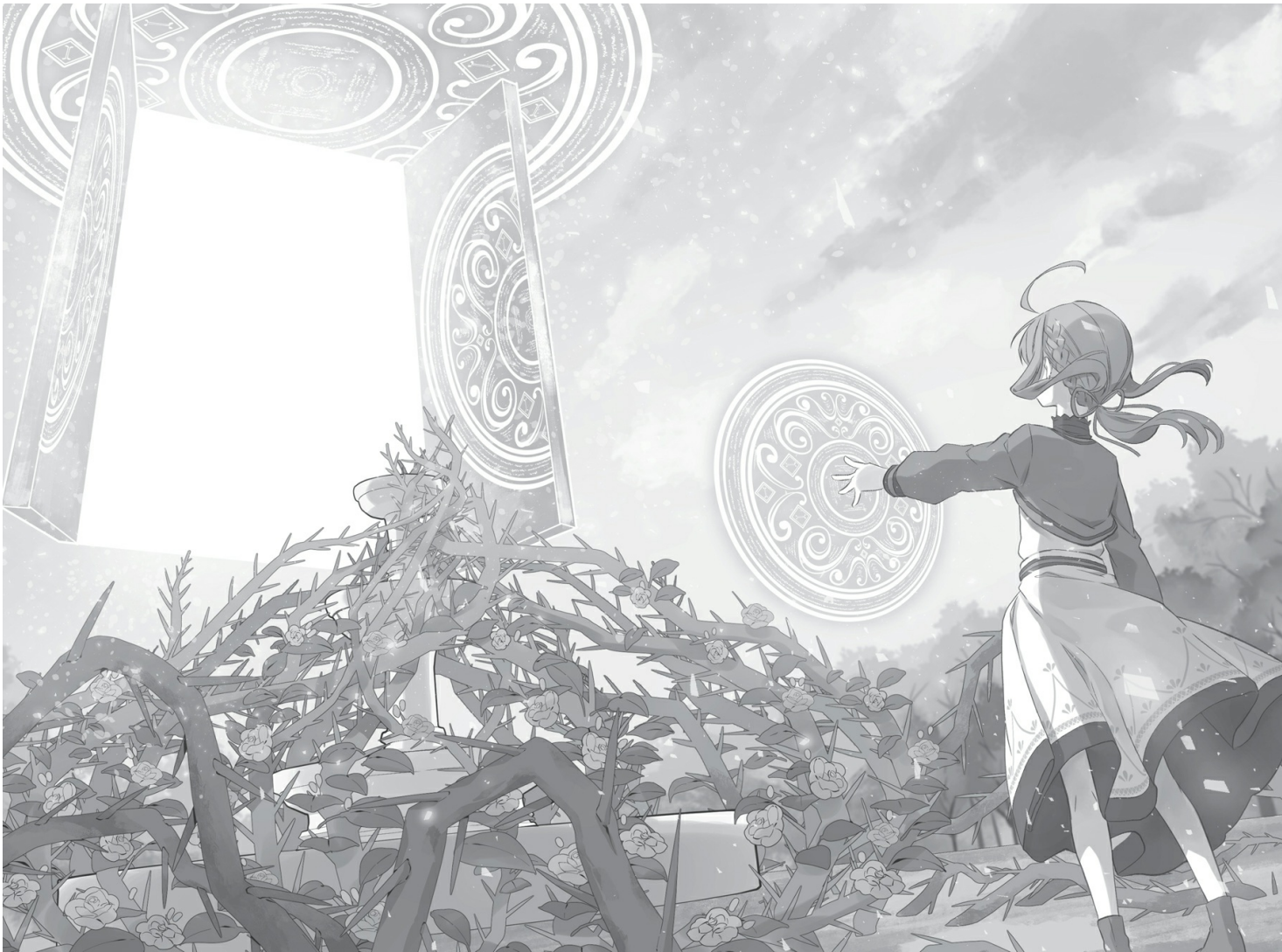
Having produced the gate, the Silent Witch finally opened her mouth to speak.

While Monica could use most spells without chanting, there were certain ones she couldn't abbreviate. Those ones were unrelated to the construction of magical formulae—they were called *ritual chants*, words used when summoning a high-ranking spirit to show respect and appreciation for the summoned being.

Though Monica was usually too scared to even open her mouth in front of people, she now intoned the ritual chant right in front of Casey.

"In the name of Monica Everett, the Silent Witch and one of the Seven Sages...I command this gate to open."





The closed gate swung open without a sound, causing white light to come rushing through it. A powerful gust blew through Monica's light-brown hair. Her bangs whipped in the wind, and below them, her eyes reflected the white light, causing them to shine the brilliant color of spring verdure.

"Come forth from the edge of stillness—Sheffield, King of the Wind Spirits!"

* * *

As Felix stood in front of the west storehouse watching the contractors ferry in supplies, he noticed a slight wriggling in his pocket. Wildianu—his contracted spirit who took the form of a white lizard—was moving around. It seemed he had something to tell him.

Felix told Elliott he'd be stepping away for a moment, then left and hid himself behind a tree.

"What is it, Wil?" he asked.

"...I apologize for interrupting your work," replied Wildianu, poking his face out of the prince's pocket before anxiously looking around.

This didn't seem normal. "Wil?" asked Felix a second time.

Wildianu looked up at Felix with his light-blue eyes. "A gate to summon a Spirit King has opened somewhere in the vicinity."

"You mean someone has used a spell to summon a Spirit King?"

"Yes. I sense it is most likely Sheffield, King of the Wind Spirits."

Most high mages couldn't even summon a Spirit King. The ability was essentially limited to members of the Seven Sages. *Is a Sage nearby?* wondered Felix. *One specializing in wind magic...the Barrier Mage Louis Miller, perhaps?*

The summoning of a Spirit King was no ordinary event. It meant a large-scale battle was happening—or something rivaling one in importance.

"Wil," said the prince, "keep an eye out for now. Once the work finishes, we'll go take a look around the campus."

"Yes, sir."

The white lizard gave a small shake of his head and returned to Felix's pocket.

But neither the prince nor Wildianu—who was a poor detector—had realized the more insidious reality: that inside the storehouse right next to them, flame mana was whirling into a spiral, about to explode at any moment.

* * *

The gate that had appeared over the fountain was significantly smaller than the one that had shot down the pterodragons from the skies over Kerbeck. Even so, it held more than enough power to scatter the roses before her.

The wind blowing from the gate was wrapped in white particles of light that danced through the air, formed white blades, and tore the roses covering the fountain asunder—along with the trap’s magic formula at the bottom of the structure.

It was like a giant hatchet swinging around at random. The rose vines flew apart, and cracks ran through the fountain.

Eventually, the wind ceased, and the gate made of white light melted back into the sky.

“...Monica?”

Monica heard Casey’s voice from behind her. It was confused, hoarse, and shaky.

“...What was that...? And...you said a Sage...”

Monica didn’t turn around—she kept her eyes on the fountain. “...You weren’t the only one keeping secrets, Casey.”

That was the most she could manage to tell her right now. More importantly, there was still something she needed to do. Now that she’d destroyed the trap, she could rewrite the defensive barrier around the academy.

The formula, engraved at the bottom of the fountain, was so wondrous that it made Monica sigh in admiration. When the Barrier Mage Louis Miller put in the time to create something, it was always a marvel.

The skill needed to construct a delicate, complex barrier like this was like that of a first-rate architect. Louis was a genius among geniuses, just in a different way than Monica was—though his personality left something to be desired.

Several dummy formulae had been embedded in the main formula to guard against overwriting. She had to disengage those before she'd be able to rewrite the barrier.

"Monica! The mana in the west storehouse is out of control! It's gonna blow!"

Even Nero's yells no longer reached Monica's ears. Her eyes were fully open, reflecting the complicated, nigh incomprehensible magic formula. She read it piece by piece as though she was solving an equation.

Dummy formulae analyzed. Disengaging...done. Specifying barrier coordinates. Changing activation conditions from "external attack" to "internal attack." Restricting to fire-attribute spells. Eliminating oxygen. Now I just have to compress it. Further, further...

Unlike her flashy spell for summoning the Spirit King, this was a modest, quiet battle. Having gained full comprehension of Louis's defensive barrier, she compressed it down so that it would cover just the Spiralflame instead of the whole school. She could make it extremely small, since the Spiralflame could fit in the palm of one's hand.

.....Done!

A moment after she'd finished rewriting the formula, the Spiralflame set under a shelf in the west storehouse blew. It was like a million tiny springs all finally uncoiling, sending fire swirling into a spiral.

Those flames would have incinerated everyone within range, ignited the fireworks, and caused a massive explosion...but the super-small barrier Monica had rewritten held it all in.

Normally, barriers were made to permit the entrance of things humans needed to live—oxygen and so forth. But Monica had purposely set it to block oxygen from entering. It was the same as the logic behind putting a lid over an alcohol burner to extinguish the flame. Without any oxygen inside the barrier, the Spiralflame's effects quickly vanished as though nothing had happened.

Monica used a detection formula to verify that the Spiralflame had completely burned itself out, then she heaved a long sigh.

"Spiralflame...successfully disabled," she said, falling over backward. She'd hit

the bottom of her mana reserves after summoning the Spirit King and rewriting the large barrier spell.

Nero looked down at Casey, who was stunned silent, and he shot her a proud grin. “How’d you like *that*? My master’s pretty amazing, eh?”



EPILOGUE

A Soft Wall

“Heyyy, Monica. You awake?”

Lying back in the ruins of the fountain, Monica wheezed. Out of breath, she answered, “I...think.”

“Man, that was crazy,” continued Nero. “You’ve got basically no mana left, right?”

“...Yeah, I haven’t...used this much in a long time...”

Monica’s typical combat style involved using precisely controlled spells to defeat her enemy, keeping her mana consumption to a minimum.

But the Witch of Thorns’s rose cage had been too quick to regenerate. Her only option to defeat it had been to use an extremely high-powered spell.

Right now, all she wanted was to succumb to her exhaustion and fall asleep, but she still had things she needed to do. Slowly, she got to her feet.

Casey laughed weakly, her face haggard. “Ha-ha. I was only thinking about making you like me—I was totally fooled... I never really looked at you, the real you. And that’s why I lost.”

“Casey...”

The girl with the ponytail smiled sadly. She didn’t seem hateful or angry—it looked more like she’d just given up. “What’s that look for? I’m a bad guy. I deceived you.”

She’d been kind to Monica to get close to Felix. And she’d succeeded, too. By placing herself at Monica’s side, she’d found out what the student council members’ plans were and carried out her own scheme to assassinate the prince.

...Casey had used her.

“But I still...,” murmured Monica, clutching the fabric of her uniform as words rose from deep inside her chest. “When you said you’d teach me how to ride a

horse, I...I was really, really happy.”

Even if everything Casey had said and done had been to take advantage of her, Monica still couldn’t bring herself to hate the other girl.

Not the girl who had put her fried fish between slices of bread and taken a big, hearty bite.

Not the girl who had casually smoothed things over when Claudia and Lana started to fight.

Not the girl who had unfolded that pretty handkerchief she’d embroidered with a bashful smile.

Monica *had* liked her.

“...Stop, Monica.” Casey closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. “I tried to kill the prince. I’m the worst of the worst... You have to hate me.”

For plotting to assassinate the prince, Casey and her family would be put to death.

...Executed...

A chill ran down Monica’s spine at the thought. As she tried to stop her heart from pounding its way out of her chest, Nero looked up at the sky and clicked his tongue.

“Hey, Monica,” he said. “We’ve got a problem. I’m gonna hide.”

Her familiar quickly leaped away—he would probably duck into the shadow of a tree and change back into a cat.

She’d known he’d show up sooner or later, once she’d tampered with the barrier. Her legs wobbled, but she managed to stand and steady herself before turning to look up at the sky.

Far in the distance, she could see a tiny black speck. It was heading this way at incredible speed... Had they even considered how they would land? Monica had a bad feeling and took a few steps back.

Moments later, two figures descended from the air—they were spinning like a top, with enough force to drill themselves into the ground.

One of them—a beauty in a maid’s outfit—continued her high-speed rotation, standing straight up. She stopped once she’d submerged herself in dirt up to her knees.

The other figure, who had been positioned behind her, swung his staff and levitated just in time, avoiding a crash landing.

The one with the staff was furious. “Why...you...horribly moronic maid! How many times have I told you to rethink your landings?!”

“I have named this one the Tornado Kick,” came the other’s monotone voice. “It has a high attack power and is extremely stylish.”

“You’re knee-deep in the dirt. ‘Stylish’ is the last thing I’d call it.”

With a dramatic click of his tongue, the man, dressed in a robe embroidered with gold thread and sporting a long braid, took a look around—it was the Barrier Mage Louis Miller.

Seeing Monica standing amid the remains of the roses and the fountain, he heaved a sigh. “...I knew something awful had happened to my barrier, so I came to have a look...and I see you were indeed the culprit, my esteemed colleague.”

“H-hello again, Mr. Louis.” Monica bowed her head.

Louis observed her face for a few moments; then his expression turned suspicious. “Well, this is unusual. You seem to have expended all your mana. I’ve never seen you use so much of it—you, who destroyed that entire pterodragon horde without breaking a sweat.”

Behind his monocle, Louis narrowed his eyes dangerously. Then, he looked toward Casey, who stood a short distance away.

“Now then,” he said. “The young lady over there... I can see she’s a student of this academy. Is she an enemy or an ally?”

As Monica hemmed and hawed, Casey shrugged a little before stating plainly, “An enemy. A foolish enemy who tried and failed to assassinate Prince Felix.”

“I see,” said Louis. “Ryn, restrain her.”

The beauty in the maid’s outfit pulled her legs out of the ground and tied

Casey's hands behind her back. Casey didn't resist—she just let it happen.

"Now then, my fellow Sage," continued Louis, "I don't expect a formal oral report...but could I trouble you to explain a little of what's going on?"

"Ummm, she set up a *Spiralflame* in the west storehouse, where they were bringing in fireworks."

The word *Spiralflame* made Louis frown. He, too, was well aware of the terrifying magic item—not to mention the havoc it might cause in close proximity to fireworks.

"And, um," continued Monica, "I didn't think I'd be able to completely prevent it with a defensive barrier of my own, so I, um, borrowed yours, Mr. Louis."

"I seem to recall the esteemed Witch of Thorns having set a trap around the defensive barrier."

"...I broke it. By summoning a Spirit King."

"And I spared no effort layering dummy formula upon dummy formula to prevent others from rewriting it."

"I'm good at figuring stuff like that out, so... Oh, but it took me almost a whole minute to do it. Really!"

"One minute... All that in one minute...? I spent a month making it... One minute?" Louis's face twitched. His eyes looked vacant. "Henceforth, should another one of my barriers be rewritten, I shall immediately suspect you."

"Hwah?!"

"What I mean to say is that almost no one else could manage that," said Louis, muttering under his breath, "I wouldn't stand for it. What *hogwash*."

Monica pretended not to hear that last part. Louis Miller tried to appear refined, but deep down, he was considerably less polite.

"All right, I have a good understanding of the situation," he said eventually. "Has the second prince discovered your identity?"

"N-no, I don't...think so."

“Good. We’ll retrieve the Spiralflame in secret and take the girl into custody. Please continue to guard the—”

“W-wait!” interrupted Monica.

Louis frowned—this wasn’t like her. “What is it?”

“C-Casey... What’s going to, um, to happen to her?”

“They’ll conduct an investigation and get the names of everyone involved in the assassination. If she’s too tight-lipped, they’ll probably use mental interference magecraft.”

Magecraft that interfered with the mind, such as to force someone to confess their crimes or obey a command, was generally designated as forbidden. It was permitted only in specific circumstances, such as interrogations of violent criminals, and it severely damaged the mind of the target. In the worst cases, the person would fall into a coma and never wake up.

Guessing from her expression what Monica was thinking, Louis smiled coldly. “You object to the use of mental interference magic, don’t you? Unfortunately, in her case, it may be *better* if she never wakes up. The attempted assassination of a member of the royal family demands capital punishment. Being executed while unconscious will at least spare her the pain.”

Casey went pale.

Monica swallowed the saliva that had built up in her mouth and forced her trembling body to look straight at Louis. “M-Mr. Louis, you’re...with the first prince’s faction...aren’t you?”

“Well, now *that* was abrupt. Why do you ask?”

“Please...answer my question.”

Louis leveled an intelligent, searching gaze at Monica. Normally, the Silent Witch would immediately look away—but now she was staring him dead in the eye. That caught his interest.

“All right, I shall. I went to school with First Prince Lionel. I’ve no objection to people thinking I am part of his faction. But there is one thing I don’t want you to misunderstand. I have no special desire for the first prince to ascend the

throne.”

“...Huh?”

Monica had expected him to insist that Prince Lionel was the rightful heir, so she was a little taken aback.

Louis continued. “I claim to be part of his faction because I don’t like Duke Clockford or the second prince.”

“.....”

That reasoning was very like Louis. But it was true that he was friends with the first prince. Now that she was sure, Monica made her next play.

“C-Casey is connected to Landor—she’s part of the first prince’s faction.”

Louis’s eyebrow twitched.

Monica continued, wasting no time. “If it was made public that a member of the first prince’s faction with ties to Landor plotted to assassinate the second prince...that would cause problems for the first prince’s faction, wouldn’t it?” If the truth got out, the first prince’s camp would be in a position of considerable disadvantage.

Louis’s lips curled, and he narrowed his eyes. “I never thought the day would come when you, someone so disinterested in politics, would try to make such a deal with me... How truly cunning of you.”

“Nobody knows of this attempted assassination,” said Monica. “Not even Prince Felix. The only ones who know are Casey and me.”

“Are you telling me to pretend this incident never happened, then?”

“.....”

She hadn’t considered quite so convenient an outcome, but she wanted to prevent Casey from being executed at all costs.

Seeing that Monica wouldn’t back down, Louis gave her a little lecture. “The first prince’s faction isn’t monolithic. Frankly, both the first prince and his mother have no interest in the throne. They prefer to keep things aboveboard—they’d never go for an assassination...but that doesn’t necessarily apply to

everyone supporting him.”

Louis paused there, directing a chilly stare at Casey. “That’s why they have to purge any problem elements from their group, such as those who might stupidly attempt an assassination of the second prince.”

“Th-there should be a way to, um, handle things s-secretly.”

Monica bit down hard on her lip and glared at Louis, tears in her eyes.

At the same time, Louis’s mind was racing with calculations. Using mental interference magecraft on Casey, forcing her to confess the name of the extremists, and then eliminating her and everyone else involved would be the safest option.

But if he did that, he would likely lose Monica’s cooperation in the future. The Silent Witch’s powers were even greater than she herself realized. She was too valuable a resource to give up.

Weighing his options, he made a proposal.

“If the girl confesses honestly to everything, I promise not to use mental interference magecraft. She’ll be sent to a convent, never to appear again in elite society.” That was the best Louis could do.

Monica bowed deeply. “Thank you, Mr. Louis.”

“In exchange, I want your continued cooperation guarding the second prince.”

“Yes, sir!” Monica nodded without hesitation. She took him at his word without a doubt in her mind.

That wasn’t a good sign. One of the reasons he’d chosen Monica to guard the prince was because of how much she distrusted others. The Silent Witch feared other people. She trusted no one, and she opened her heart to no one. That was why he’d thought she’d make a good bodyguard.

A trusting person made for a bad bodyguard.

“...Don’t you think you’ve grown a little soft?” he said.

“Huh?”

Louis pointed a finger right at her forehead and peered into her face. “You are Monica Everett, the Silent Witch, one of the Seven Sages... Monica Norton, student of Serendia Academy, is a *false identity*.”

Monica gave a start.

“Pray never forget that fact,” finished Louis.

“...Y-yes.”

Monica’s gaze wandered as she nodded.

Watching her, Louis couldn’t help but feel uneasy.

* * *

Thank goodness... At least I managed to stop Casey from being executed... I think.

Monica privately breathed a sigh of relief. Not only was Louis intelligent—he could talk, too. With her terrible negotiation skills, it was no easy task to win over someone like him.

But she’d been able to force him to compromise—a big victory as far as she was concerned.

As Ryn bound Casey, Louis gave her instructions. “Ryn, escort our esteemed noble to the nearby Magic Corps outpost. Give them my name, and they should provide her with a room.”

“Understood, sir,” replied Ryn. “What about you, Lord Louis?”

“I need to do something about this misshapen barrier,” he answered, gesturing with his chin at the collapsed fountain.

Monica had borrowed the barrier and rewritten it to contain the Spiralflame, so it was no longer capable of protecting the entire school. She knew he couldn’t just leave it like that. And even if he could, the remnants of the fountain and tattered roses had left the place in a terrible state. She shrank in on herself, feeling guilty.

Casey, her limbs bound, turned her way.

“Monica.”

Monica shook. She knew this would be her final farewell to Casey.

Casey would never return to the academy. But Monica didn't know what to say to her.

She looked back at the other girl like a lost child, unable to apologize or say good-bye.

Casey lowered her eyebrows and offered a troubled smile. Then she laughed a little, as if to say, *What are we going to do with you?*



“I won’t say I’m sorry or thank you. I plotted the assassination of the second prince—I’m your enemy.”

“.....”

“I’m not your friend. Not even close. So don’t make that face.”

Only then did Monica realize how tightly she was clenching her teeth.

The inside of her nose stung. Her eyes were hot.

A hiccup escaped her throat just as a droplet fell from the corner of her eye.

“You can’t cry over your enemy.”

“B-but...I...I...”

“You’re so softhearted for a Sage. It’s going to get you killed in your sleep one day.”

Her astonished tone, the way she laughed—everything was just the same as always. This was Casey, the kind girl who took care of others.

“Hate me like you should. If you can’t, then forget about me.”

“...N-no.” Monica shook her head. “I’ll...never forget. I won’t.”

“What are we going to do with you...?” Casey laughed weakly. She really did seem at a loss.

Monica sniffled, and Casey turned to Ryn. “Take me away already.”

Ryn nodded and lowered her gaze.

A moment later, the two of them were wrapped in a wind barrier. Soon, they’d lift into the air, and Ryn would escort Casey away.

Suddenly, as if she’d just remembered, Casey lifted her head and turned back to Monica. “Oh, right. I won’t apologize for what I did, but...”

Through her tears, Monica saw Casey smile sadly.

“Sorry I won’t be able to...teach you horseback riding or make you that embroidery.”

And that was it—this time, she turned her back on Monica for good.

Ryn and Casey floated up into the air. Monica stared hard at their backs, burning the image into her memory.

Casey didn't look at her again. But still facing away, she spoke one last time.

"Good-bye, Monica."

The words sounded just the same as they had every other time she'd said them. The same as when she'd said them to Monica Norton, before she'd known Monica was the Silent Witch.

And then she began to float away into the distance.

Monica kept watching the sky, even after the two of them had vanished from sight.

Eventually, Louis pushed some of the fountain rubble out of the way and said, almost to himself, "You need to learn how to vent your emotions properly."



“...I’m...not good at that.”

“Just take it out on some small fry.”

Only Louis would actually do such a thing without hesitating. As Monica wiped her tears on her uniform sleeve, Louis shoved his neat handkerchief into her face, then returned to the fountain.

“I’m very busy repairing the barrier a certain crazed witch turned to rubble,” he said. “If you’re not willing to help, then get out of here. I’ll handle the cover story for that girl.”

“...Your handkerchief.”

“My wife gave it to me on my birthday, so I want it back. After you wash and iron it.”

“...All right,” said Monica with a sniffle. She lowered her eyebrows and smiled at Louis’s familiar attitude.

* * *

After waiting for her tear-swollen face to recover somewhat, Monica headed to the student council room. The corners of her eyes were still a little red, but she figured no one would notice, since she always had her head down.

When a person’s mana was depleted, they experienced symptoms similar to anemia. That was exactly how Monica felt right now. Dragging her heavy body through the hallway, she eventually reached her destination and opened the door.

Everyone aside from Monica was there. Apparently, they had already finished overseeing the unloading of supplies.

As Monica wondered what to say, Felix turned to her with concern on his face.

“Cyril told me a stack of wooden beams toppled over,” he said. “Were you or your friend hurt?”

“N-no, we’re, um, fine...”

“I see. In that case, since we don’t have any regular work today, we can adjourn the meeting. I have something to take care of after this anyway.”

Monica secretly sighed in relief. To be honest, she was barely able to stand.

Ugh... My head is all fuzzy...

As she struggled to remain conscious, Neil looked at her with worry.

“Um, are you all right, Lady Norton?” he asked.

“...Yeff...”

“You don’t sound ‘all right’ at all!” he exclaimed.

The rest of the council members had already begun to leave.

Felix seemed to have some pressing business to attend to, and he left the room immediately. Bridget went straight back to her dorm as well.

Cyril got up to start checking the locks, and though Elliott kept casting glances at Monica, he eventually appeared to get fed up and left the room.

It’s been so long since I ran out of mana... My senses are— Anyway, I should leave so I don’t get in the way of Lord Cyril locking up... Her mind still fuzzy, Monica forced her heavy legs to move.

As she did so, still looking down at the floor, her head bumped into something. For a wall, it was pretty soft.

“.....Hey.”

And now it was speaking in a low voice, too.

She exhaled in relief at how comfortable this was, hardly paying any attention to the voice coming from above her.

It seemed that as she leaned into the wall, her mana had begun to recover. And it was cold against her forehead, which felt nice...

“L-Lady Norton. Lady Norton!” exclaimed Neil in a panic.

Monica gave a start and looked up. Her eyes met Cyril’s. He was looking back down at her. She’d been leaning against his back.

Flustered, Monica stumbled backward and bowed to him. “I-I-I-I’m so s-sorry! I, um, wasn’t paying attention!”

And then Monica remembered.

Cyril Ashley had a physical trait that made it easy for him to store up mana. Because of that, his broach—actually a magical item—expelled the unnecessary mana from his body.

In other words, the mana density in the area around him was a little higher than usual. Deprived of mana, Monica's body had unconsciously sought him out.

He'll scold me. He's going to yell at me; I just know it.

Monica squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the sound of shouting, but after a few moments, she still hadn't heard it. Nervously, she looked back up. Cyril had furrowed his brow, his expression conflicted.

"Lord Cyril?"

Cyril tried twice to say something but stopped each time. Suddenly, he looked anguished and bowed his head low.

Both Monica and Neil next to her were baffled by his behavior.

"Lord Cyril?"

"V-Vice President?"

Hesitantly, they called out to him. When Cyril replied, his tone was bitter.

"I'm sorry."

He was apologizing to Monica.

Monica was very confused. At first, she thought he was apologizing to Neil, not her, but he was definitely facing her direction. So he *was* apologizing to her.

"Um, Lord Cyril... Please don't apologize. Wh-why are you...apologizing?"

"...I was so distracted counting everything as it was carried in that I didn't check to make sure the ropes were secure. The accident was my fault."

"B-but, but that's..."

It wasn't Cyril's fault. In fact, Casey had been the one to make a cut in the rope.

But by standing up for Casey, she'd made the accident out to be Cyril's fault.

Did I make him...into the bad guy?

The moment she realized this, she felt all the blood drain from her body. A wild mix of emotions rushed into her head. She couldn't think.

"Lord Cyril, you're..... It's not your..."

The moment she spoke, the floodgates seemed to open and her tears came rushing back, along with her hiccupping sobs and snot, too. Monica started whimpering and crying.

Cyril and Neil panicked.

"H-hey, Accountant Norton!" exclaimed Cyril.

"Lady Norton, um, I, er... J-j-j-just calm down, okay?!" cried Neil.

Monica's tears didn't stop.

Cyril held his head in his hands. "Why are you crying when I'm the one apologizing?!"

"I'm...sowwy...ngh...", she said between sniffles. "I'm, I'm so...so sorry... I'm sorry..."

Monica crumpled to the floor, where she sat sniveling. They weren't tears of sadness. They were tears of guilt.

I'm sorry for deceiving you. I'm sorry for lying to you again and again and again...

She continued to cry, and cry, and cry... Before she knew it, she'd lost consciousness.

"D-did she...fall asleep?" wondered Cyril aloud.

"I think the crying tired her out," said Neil.

Sitting on the floor, her face a teary mess, Monica was breathing steadily now.

Cyril and Neil exchanged glances, not knowing what to do.

Ten minutes later...

"...And *why*, exactly, did you call me here?"

Claudia Ashley always had a gloomy expression, but now that she'd been summoned to the student council room, it grew even drearier. She stared at her older brother—the one who had dragged her here.

Cyril looked awkwardly toward Monica sleeping on the sofa and said, "When Accountant Norton wakes up, I want you to bring her to her room. We're obviously not allowed in the girls' dormitory."

"...I am not your errand girl, you know."

Cyril didn't know how to respond to his sister's hostility. Neil, however, looked up at Claudia, his face troubled.

"Um, won't you do us this favor, Lady Claudia?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it," she replied. "Monica and I are good friends. And a good friend helps her friend to her dorm whenever she needs it."

The abrupt and vivid change in her attitude made Cyril's face twitch, but looking over at Monica snoring on the sofa, he swallowed his angry retort and silently put his blazer over the sleeping girl.

SECRET EPISODE
It Was Like Love...



After leaving the student council room, Felix made sure nobody was around, then poked his pocket. When Wildianu peeked out in his white lizard form, the prince spoke to him quietly, still cautious of their surroundings. "You said before that a Spirit King had been summoned, yes?"

"Yes, sir," replied Wildianu. "I sensed a gate in the vicinity."

"Sneak into the faculty room and see if the teachers are talking about it."

Even the student council president would seem suspicious if he hung around the faculty room for no reason. Wildianu was a better fit, as he could infiltrate without being seen.

"What will you do, Master?" the spirit asked.

"I'll go look around to see if anything seems odd outside."

"Understood. If anything should happen, call for me right away."

Wildianu crawled out of his pocket, then quickly moved over to the wall and headed for the faculty room. Felix saw him off, then exited the school building. Unfortunately, he'd never learned any detection spells, so he'd have to rely on his instincts...though there was one place he definitely wanted to check.

The old gardens. Felix knew there was a large-scale barrier protecting the academy hidden in the fountain there. The magic formula had interested him so much, he'd gotten a duplicate key made, and the old gardens had become one of his haunts.

The formula had been made by one of the Seven Sages, the Barrier Mage Louis Miller, and was a work of art even by the prince's amateurish appraisal. You didn't get to see such a complex, precise magical formula every day.

Assuming there was an emergency that warranted the summoning of a Spirit King... If the academy was attacked from the outside, the barrier would have activated. And there's nothing wrong with checking on it anyway, he thought, heading for the old gardens.

The gate leading to them was open, and the lock had fallen to the ground. He picked it up and looked at it, his eyes widening in surprise. Unbelievably, it had been cut clean off the gate. The neatness of the severed portion meant it

hadn't worn down over time—something else had happened.

Very small burn marks... Someone used flame magecraft to burn it? It's made of metal, yet it was cut so cleanly. That isn't easy.

His expression turning severe, Felix moved deeper into the gardens. He concealed his footsteps, proceeding with caution. After a turn at the rhododendron beds was a somewhat more open plaza area, with a fountain at its center that was never used... Or that's what he had expected to find, at least.

Now the fountain was in ruins. Bits of rose vines and flowers were scattered among the debris.

And next to where the fountain used to be, a man was squatting, doing some sort of work. He was young and had a long chestnut-colored braid. He wore a gold-embroidered robe and held a long staff. The moment Felix saw the man, he knew exactly who he was. Only the Seven Sages were allowed to wear those robes and carry those staves. And besides, Felix would never forget that long braid.

A Sage... The Barrier Mage Louis Miller? ...What is he doing here?

He would have contacted the school in advance if he had been here for his regular inspection of the barrier. Felix hadn't heard about any such notice. And the smashed-up fountain debris and rose vines confirmed his suspicion that something out of the ordinary had occurred.

There should be a defensive barrier formula at the bottom of that fountain... Has it been destroyed? What in the world happened here?

Louis continued muttering chants under his breath; he seemed to be making adjustments to the barrier. Meanwhile, a powerful wind blew, and a young woman wearing a maid's uniform descended from the sky.

Felix had heard that the Barrier Mage had a contract with a high wind spirit. This must be her.

"Lord Louis," she said, "I have completed my escort mission."

"Good work," he replied. "Now, go recover the remains of the Spiralflame in the west storehouse."

“You certainly drive this spirit hard.”

“I can’t step away at the moment. This barrier is... Ugh. I need to completely redo the entire thing. I know it was to disable the *Spiralflame*, but this was quite the violent solution.”

Felix frowned at the conversation. He’d heard the word *Spiralflame* before. It was the name of an extremely lethal magical tool meant for assassinations... Had one been placed in the west storehouse? He’d been there just a little while ago.

Judging from their conversation, someone must have made an attempt on my life, but the Barrier Mage saved me in secret.

Though, considering how Louis was speaking, it sounded like he hadn’t personally been the one to disable the item—it had been someone else.

...But who?

Felix held his breath and focused on their conversation.

Seeming exasperated, Louis looked down at the fountain. “I can’t exactly claim it wore down over time—not when it’s like this. What am I going to say? Sure, this was to protect the second prince, but why a *Spirit King*? And without even a staff to control the flow of mana...”

He ruffled his perfectly neat hair in frustration.

“The Silent Witch is always so reckless.”

.....What?

Felix’s heart skipped a beat when he heard the name leave Louis’s mouth.

The Silent Witch summoned a Spirit King? And saved me?

The scene from several months ago flooded back into Felix’s mind. The gate opening in the sky, the spears of wind surrounded by glittering white lights. The horde of pterodragons, all shot between the eyes. Their giant bodies drifting quietly to the ground like snow.

That utterly silent, beautiful magecraft.

And its user, the Silent Witch, had summoned a Spirit King? To save Felix?

...I want to see her.

Felix's heart leaped like a little boy hearing a story about a beloved hero.

The Silent Witch was here? Was she just passing by? Has she already infiltrated the school? She seems quite short from what I've seen of her during ceremonies... Wait. They aren't necessarily a woman, either. The Witch of Thorns calls himself a witch, but he's a man, so it's possible the Silent Witch is a man as well. In any case, they may have infiltrated the intermediate course... No, they must be one of the faculty members. Wait, no, calm down. It's still possible they haven't infiltrated—that they just happened to be in the area.

He felt his thoughts getting away from him. This wasn't like him. But that was how much Felix practically adored the Silent Witch.

I want to see them. I want to meet them. I want to see their uncharted magecraft up close.

Felix covered his mouth with a hand—his lips had turned up into a smile without his realizing. The hand then served to stifle a sigh of admiration. He felt his cheeks flushing, completely out of character.

He was just like a boy searching for his first love.

Ah, to think they were so close by... The prince grasped the fabric of his uniform to try and calm his pounding heart. *The one who excites me...*

* * *

"You want to know about Monica Norton?" repeated Lindsey Pail, the ballroom dancing teacher, blinking in surprise.

She was talking to Carl Boyd, the one who taught chess, one of the elective classes. He was a giant of a man with a shaved head and stern features. While he looked for all the world like a seasoned soldier, he was actually a marquess from a distinguished family and possessed an impressive intellect.

And now the man had come to her asking about Monica Norton.

Lindsey put a finger to her cheek, thinking for a moment before speaking. "She's a well-behaved, earnest girl. Her grades are a little all over the place...but she's a very hard worker."

“I heard she had to take a retest for ballroom dancing class. Is she still taking supplementary lessons?”

“No, she passed the retest just fine. No extra lessons...”

But why is Boyd concerned about Monica taking extra lessons? wondered Lindsey, confused. The answer didn’t take long to come to her, though. She struck her palm with a fist. “Ah, could this be about the competition?”

“I’d like to have Monica Norton participate,” said Boyd solemnly.

Lindsey broke out into a festive tone. “Oh, how wonderful! She’s just transferred in—and yet she’s being chosen for such a big event!”

She was genuinely happy that a student in her own class was being acknowledged like this.

As her face broke into a smile, another voice interrupted them.

“...She’s a transfer student?”

Lindsey turned around to find the newest addition to their faculty, William Macragan, looking her way. He was the fundamental magecraft teacher. But Monica wasn’t taking his course—why did he know about her?

Oh, I see. She’s on the student council and all... That must be why he remembers her. Satisfied with her explanation, she smiled at him. “Yes. Monica Norton and Glenn Dudley—both of them just transferred in this year.”

“Hmm, I see. The two of them, eh...”

The elderly professor, who once taught at Minerva’s Mage Training Institution, was known for having instructed the Silent Witch and the Barrier Mage, who were now both members of the Seven Sages. He toyed with the white mustache covering his mouth. When he spoke, he sounded a little absentminded.

“Well, this should be very interesting,” he said. “I’m so glad I came to this school.”

* * *

On the top floor of the west tower of Castle Ridill was a room that only the Seven Sages and the king himself were permitted to enter. It was called the

Jade Chamber. It had an octagonal shape, which was a little unusual for this kingdom, and its ceiling had been extravagantly fitted with a glass pane.

In the center of the room stood a round table and eight chairs. One was for the king, and the other seven were for the Sages.

Only one of them was filled at the moment—by a woman looking up past the glass pane and into the night sky. The loose waves of her silver hair hung at her back, and she wore a robe over a thin silken dress. She was the foremost prophet in the kingdom and one of the Seven Sages: the Starseer Witch Mary Harvey.

By reading the stars in the night sky, she could foretell the kingdom's future. But right now, the witch's ghostly pale-blue eyes were narrowed.

"Ah, once again... No matter how many times I try, it doesn't work. Why can't I see it?"

The countless stars, glittering like silver sand in the sky, told Mary what lay in store for those most important to the kingdom.

And yet there was one person's future she was finding it impossible to read.

That person was the grandson of Duke Clockford, the most influential man in the kingdom—the prince Felix Arc Ridill.

He'd inherited the late second queen's beauty, which had captivated many in elite society. In school, he consistently achieved excellent grades, and his skills in swordplay and horseback riding were first-rate. He was also familiar with the cultures and languages of other nations; in fact, he'd already achieved some success in diplomacy.

Everyone who knew him said he was sure to become a wise ruler, remembered for generations to come.

Mary'd had the chance to see him herself several times during social occasions. He truly was a man of great caliber. It wasn't just a matter of his appearance, either—his manner and carriage were splendid as well.

Such an incredible person must surely have been born under the brightest of stars—and yet, for some reason, she couldn't see it.

Up above, she could see several portentous astral lights. They predicted a major event in the Kingdom's near future. But their twinkling was still faint, and Mary couldn't foretell what they meant.

"...What is it that lies ahead?" she murmured.

There was nobody around to answer her.

The witch who could read the stars lowered her silver eyelashes and quietly breathed a somber sigh.



Characters So Far

Characters



Monica Everett

The Silent Witch, one of the Seven Sages. Skilled at accurately reproducing patterns she memorizes but didn't choose art class as an elective.

In her words, "It's not that I like art; it's that I like patterns and diagrams..."



Louis Miller

The Barrier Mage, one of the Seven Sages. Excels in defensive barriers, but his combat style is extremely aggressive.

If he throws open his ornamental robe, you should run away and never look back.



Nero

Monica's familiar. Finally succeeded at replicating the Serendia Academy uniform when changing into human form. Doesn't realize that a school uniform doesn't suit his apparent age (mid-twenties).



Rynzbelfeid

A high wind spirit contracted to Louis. Currently obsessed with researching stylish landing methods.

Nobody understands what she considers stylish.



Felix Arc Ridill

Second prince of the Kingdom of Ridill. President of Serendia Academy's student council.

Perfect at everything, from leading a lady in dancing to eating off a skewer. Calls himself a huge fan of the Silent Witch.

His true motives are shrouded in mystery.



Elliott Howard

Son of Count Dasvy. One of the student council secretaries.

Clings to the social hierarchy and truly hates those who casually leave their assigned path or don't fulfill their own duties—even if they're a noble or a royal.



Cyril Ashley

Foster son of Marquess Highown. Vice president of the student council.

Cursed with an inability to draw animals without giving them big, round eyes and wriggly bodies. He truly believes this is normal.



Bridget Greyham

Daughter of Marquess Shaleberry. A student council secretary and one of the three most beautiful girls at the academy.

Has known Felix since they were young; she taught him linguistics as well as how to dance.

Characters



Neil Clay Maywood

Son of Baron Maywood.
Officer of general
affairs of the student
council.

Because of his
stunningly beautiful
fiancée, some boys
are intensely envious
of him. A hard worker
who has recently
fallen into the role of
taking care of Glenn,
who is essentially a
large dog.



Isabelle Norton

Daughter of
Count Kerbeck.
A huge fan of
the Silent Witch,
a passionate
performer, and
Monica's collaborator
on her mission.

She loves to talk about
the Silent Witch but
doesn't realize another
of her biggest fans is
right nearby.



Lana Colette

Daughter of Baron
Colette and Monica's
classmate. Has a very
wealthy merchant for a
father and is up on all
the latest trends.

She has excellent
calculating abilities,
though not as good as
Monica's. Her fingers
are more suited to
using an abacus than
a piano.



Glenn Dudley

A young transfer
student in the same
grade as Monica at
Serendia Academy.

Always energetic and
loud (as loud as Cyril
shouting, in fact). An
apprentice mage with
an extremely scary
master. Son of a
butcher.



Claudia Ashley

Daughter of Marquess Highown, Cyril's foster sister, and Neil's fiancée.

A mysterious and unapproachable beauty. Extremely knowledgeable, having come from the Lineage of the Wise, but hates it when other people rely on her.



Casey Grove

Daughter of Count Bright. Skilled at many things—not only horseback riding and embroidery but cooking and hunting as well. Give her a knife, and she could live in the wilderness for some time.

However, she also has more girlish interests such as clothes and accessories.



Afterword



Thank you so much for purchasing the second volume of *Secrets of the Silent Witch*.

Volume 2 adapts the fourth through sixth chapters of the web novel, with corrections and additions.

The additions, in particular, were a battle against the remaining word count, and ultimately, I submitted the first draft just barely under the maximum number of words specified by my editor.

Flying so close to the sun is thrilling... I could get addicted to it. (Mwa-ha-ha.)

When I was writing the web novel, I went through great pains not to take any detours so that the story would reach an ending in the shortest time possible. Adding things to the print version like this has allowed me to include some extra episodes. I wanted to write them in a way that would be meaningful for the characters who appear.

And as a result of writing these meaningful detours, one character's artistic... "talents," we'll call them, were exposed. Just...(whispers) don't worry too much about it.

I hope I was able to deliver new sides to the characters that I couldn't explore in the web version.

When I first picked up Volume 1 of the print version of *Secrets of the Silent Witch*, I felt like all the little details had been created with care to match the original work's atmosphere. One of the things I was particularly impressed with was the decision to move the character profiles to the end of the book, rather than putting them at the beginning.

This story features a lot of characters, so while writing the web version, I'd intersperse every two chapters or so with their profiles, placing them after the story itself, and that has been reproduced in the print version.

I think putting character profiles at the beginning of the book is the normal way to go, but they purposely moved them to the end—which made me really happy, like the editing department was treating the original work with care.

I could sense how deeply my editor was thinking about Monica and her personal growth during our meetings. As an author, I can't imagine anything nicer. Thank you all so much.

As a result, my pen just kept on going and going... It sure was a lot of fun writing all the new sections. (Mwa-ha-ha.)

Nanna Fujimi has provided more gorgeous illustrations for this volume. Thank you so much. Seeing the cover images and inserts fills me with happiness. Given how many characters were involved in the story from Volume 1, I'm sure the character designs were a major task. But they all look so charming—thank you so much. The characters new to Volume 2 are all wonderful as well. The smirk on one particularly mysterious noble girl's face... It was so dead-on to the image I had of her in my mind that I was positively moved.

When we had meetings about the characters' appearances, I would draw pictures that looked like crushed sweet buns to illustrate my ideas. Every time Nanna Fujimi managed to take those squashed buns and produce a real piece of artwork, it really moved me. (Note: My artistic talent is about on par with those round-eyed, wriggly things Cyril drew.)

And now I have two advertisements:

The *Secrets of the Silent Witch* official account is currently active on Twitter. We're posting color designs from Nanna Fujimi as well as my own original, dialogue-heavy short stories. Please take a look at them if you'd like.

In addition, this work is being adapted as a manga in B's-LOG COMICS. Tobi Tana is working on that version. I know how difficult a manga adaptation must have been with all the information dumps in the first part of the story. But Tobi Tana stayed away from monotonous panels, instead giving us attractive images and diagrams, showing a degree of skill that I can only describe as incredible.

Seriously, though. That much information in the first chapter, and Tobi Tana summarized it all. That's just wild to me...

All the characters are so expressive and charming on the pages. I particularly love how Monica's lips make funny shapes.

The adaptation can be read on Comic Walker, Nico Nico Seiga, and pixiv Comics. Please check them out when you have a chance.

We're closing in on the end of the afterword. I'd like once again to thank everyone for all their amazing help...including those of you I don't get to see; it's because of all of you that this second volume made it to print. Nanna Fujimi, who provided the wonderful illustrations; Tobi Tana, who is working on a brilliant manga adaptation; everyone at Kadokawa Books putting all their efforts into advertising; and my editor, who is always earnest in confronting the story itself.

I'd like to also extend a heartfelt thanks to everyone who purchased Volume 2. Thank you all so, so much.

Everyone who has left impressions on the web novel and sent fan letters to the editing department, thank you as well—each and every one of your words is a treasure to me.

Those writing physical fan letters have also been using wonderful letter paper. Every time I open one, I find myself smiling at how nice it looks. I'm extremely grateful for all the passionate impressions written on such beautiful stationery.

I'm also extremely grateful for the fact that this work will receive a third volume in print. I'll put all my efforts into writing it, so I hope you stick around to follow the continuation of Monica's story.

Matsuri Isora

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